

# Camarillo's Old Town Project May Be Model For Other Cities

*By William Fulton*

**REDEVELOPMENT:** Conservative community is showing a new look for tomorrow.

More than 40 years ago, when Caltrans was planning the route of the Ventura Freeway, the state's traffic engineers wanted to bypass Camarillo -- then a community of only a few thousand -- by building the freeway south of the existing town.

Fearful that local businesses would be bypassed as well, the local Chamber of Commerce came up with the idea of plowing the freeway through the center of town instead. Contrary to the freeway experience elsewhere in the state, Caltrans lost, the locals won, and the town was sliced in two.

But things didn't turn out the way the Chamber of Commerce expected. Even as the rest of Camarillo has prospered, Old Town has struggled ever since. In the '60s and '70s, the modern city grew up north of the freeway. And more recently, it has faced competition from other nearby retailing centers -- such as the fabulously successful Camarillo Premium Outlets -- which the city has lured to adjacent properties on the south side of the freeway.

Now, Old Town is finally getting renewed attention. Ventura Boulevard is undergoing a multimillion-dollar facelift, which has been deftly integrated with major Caltrans off ramp improvements and realignments. The city is also working with developers and property owners on renovation and new construction throughout Old Town, including a new life for the city's old firehouse and a new office/housing complex on the site of the old City Hall.

As Ventura County matures and land becomes more scarce, most cities have begun to focus on reviving their older "centers." This kind of effort means far more than just putting in cute streetlights and benches -- "street jewelry," as it is known in the trade. What it really means is searching for and uncovering the "hidden assets" of these older neighborhoods -- the unusual mixture of buildings, businesses, spaces and places that make such a location interesting, fun, and potentially lively, and that most newer neighborhoods and shopping centers simply can't match. And it means finding the public improvement projects that can highlight those assets and give them a competitive advantage.

In this way, the revitalization efforts of Old Town Camarillo might serve as an object lesson in how to "re-center" Ventura County's communities. There's much more to this neighborhood -- and to the Old Town revival effort -- than meets the eye.

You might not realize it if you're just whizzing by on Highway 101, but Old Town is not just the older commercial strip along Ventura Boulevard just south of the freeway. Though divided by the freeway today, this whole area is really the heart of the old Camarillo "town site" that was first laid out back in 1910. (By the way, according to local historian Judy Triem, the guy who laid the town out was some fellow named William Fulton -- not me, obviously, and no relation so far as I know.)

Like many original Ventura County communities, Camarillo was a packing town. The town was built adjacent to the Southern Pacific depot and a couple of nut and grain

warehouses. The town plan was centered around the magnificent St. Mary Magdalen Church, designed in 1914 by Albert C. Martin (who also designed the county courthouse, now Ventura City Hall, at about the same time) to serve as the Don Adolfo Camarillo family's chapel.

Today, the neighborhood is still home to a number of important civic institutions, including the Evangelical Free Church (another outstanding piece of architecture), Dizdar Park and the Los Primeros Structured School.



It's really important to note that Old Town isn't just a strip, but an actual neighborhood -- commercial properties lie on side streets behind Ventura Boulevard in some cases, and there's a residential community immediately adjacent.

All these qualities help give Old Town a varied civic quality that's completely different from the rest of Camarillo.

And the "Main Street" environment of Old Town may soon be serving a new clientele -- the college students from California State University, Channel Islands. Though it's far from adjacent (the former Camarillo State Hospital is a couple of miles away), it's the closest commercial district to the CSUCI campus -- a logical stopping-off point. And it holds the potential to be exactly the kind of walking, "hanging out" neighborhood that college students like.

City officials turned their attention to Old Town when they realized their successful efforts to attract retailers to nearby locations actually put the area at risk. The centerpiece of the entire revival effort is the set of streetscape improvements now being installed on Ventura Boulevard between Carmen Drive and Lewis Road. The district already had some angled parking, but the city's facelift will create dramatic improvements.

The Ventura Boulevard improvements include the creation of an attractive median strip with old-fashioned streetlights, widened sidewalks to encourage walking, and a large clock to serve as a focal point.

But the city has focused on two other elements that are worth mentioning.

The first is that the project calls for the use of very high-quality (i.e., expensive) materials and vegetation -- meaning that the "street jewelry" will be substantial and long-

lasting and the trees and plants will be largely full-grown from the beginning. The second is that the city has worked hard to make the Ventura Boulevard project a promising combination of urban design and infrastructure improvements.

As a former state highway, the boulevard itself has a very uneven surface -- it even slopes downward toward the freeway. The reconstruction project will even the surface out, thus making the boulevard a better street to drive on and to walk across. At the same time, the city has worked with Caltrans to smooth the potentially bumpy problems in coordinating the reconstruction of a whole series of ramps -- including Arneill Road and Fulton Street -- with the boulevard facelift.

At the same time, the city's redevelopment agency (formed only four years ago) is moving forward with a series of interesting projects adjacent to Ventura Boulevard. The former fire Station 54, a community landmark, will be leased to new tenants at some point. A new senior housing complex is under construction. The Chamber of Commerce is making plans to move from Las Posas Plaza shopping center to the city's old library, adjacent to Dizdar Park. And the city is negotiating with developers to build an innovative mixed-used project on the site of the old City Hall and adjacent parcels -- a project in which buyers would have the chance to purchase three-level units that include office/commercial space on the ground floor.

All this might seem a bit daring for Camarillo. Probably no city in the county has a reputation for being so staid, so careful, so no-frills -- in other words, so suburban. But regaining a solid and lively town center does not necessarily mean surrendering solid suburban values.

Not long ago, the great urban historian, Robert Fishman of Rutgers University in New Jersey, said that the future of American communities will be characterized by "little pockets of urbanity" -- many small areas, dotted throughout regions and metropolitan areas -- where people will mingle and the rigid separation of people and property that we usually see in the suburbs will be abandoned.

We are seeing many attempts to do bring these little pockets to Ventura County right now -- ranging from Westlake Promenade to downtown Ventura. Few have as much promise, odd as it may seem, as Old Town Camarillo.

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