

San Jose Mercury News

8-28-09, page 1

Customers eat at the sushi bar inside the new Safeway store in "The 88"



Herhold: A new Safeway opens in downtown San Jose

By Scott Herhold
Mercury News Columnist

It was a day of hoopla and ribbons, of shrimp and dips and champagne. A spiffy new Safeway market opened in downtown San Jose on Thursday with 200 brands of cheese and a sushi bar. And city officials christened a 330-slot underground parking garage paid for with \$1.85 million in public money. Recession? What recession?

In San Jose's long quest to replace the old with the new — to proclaim ourselves a real city at last — Safeway's "The Market" is the latest entrant, a nicely designed appeal to the young and to empty-nesters who want a quick dinner more than a 32-ounce bottle of ketchup.

The prospect of taking the elevator downstairs for an Italian meatball sandwich, or the jumbo ravioli with grilled chicken, is apparently helping the sales of The 88, a high-rise condominium building above the Safeway. The developers, Wilson Meany Sullivan, say they've been selling slightly less than four condos a week.

So the happiest of a politician's duties, the cutting of a red ribbon, occurred twice Thursday — once for the parking garage underneath the building (three levels and 16 security cameras), and another for the 24,000-square-foot Market at 100 S. Second St. (full-service deli, expanded wine selection and a gourmet coffee stand).

(To be accurate, politicians don't cut the ribbon anymore. True, they hold a big pair of scissors and it looks like a snip. But the ribbon is actually pulled apart at an adhesive strip, which allows it to be reused. I guess we should applaud recycling.)

Rhetoric of promise

A day like this summons the rhetoric of promise in a downtown partly eclipsed by Santana Row. We heard everything from Councilman Sam Liccardo's witty use of an old Will Rogers line ("Politics ain't worrying this county one-tenth as much as where to find a parking space.") to Mayor Chuck Reed's blunt appeal to go upstairs and buy a condo.

The folks coming into the building were making real purchases, too. The first man through the line, land use consultant Erik Schoennauer, showed me a bag containing a roasted chicken, penne pasta and macaroni and cheese.

Yet I couldn't quite shake the feeling that Tuesday's celebration was a triumph of hope over gritty reality. The truth is that downtown doesn't absolutely need a new parking garage now. There are plenty of spots in existing garages.

And for all its glitz, the Market might be one step ahead of the market: How well will a sushi bar do in a downtown already crowded with lunch options?

Eating patterns

To get a sense of how Safeway will change downtown eating patterns, I walked up Second Street to talk to Troy Tibbils, the co-owner of Zanotto's Market, which moved into downtown with a city loan several years ago. Tibbils' words were considerably more subdued.

"It's hard to say," Tibbils told me when I asked him about the impact of the new store. "We've been in this market for a long time. Safeway has been in this market for a long time. We've been able to coexist and be successful. But this is downtown. We're right next to each other. And the economy isn't great right now."

Yet redevelopment aims forward, even if it cannibalizes its children. And with a little scope of history, you have to argue that the new 88 building, with a Safeway on the ground floor and a parking garage underneath, marks a huge improvement over the old Block Three surface parking lot.

This is the same block on which redevelopment officials once wanted to erect a huge 1700-slot parking garage, which had all the promise of an airport-like eyesore. The 88 building is far more sensible.

If Safeway doesn't have the "halo effect" described by The 88's developer, Seth Bland, it casts a little more sunshine on a downtown that still yearns for it.