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Chula Vista's Third Avenue in the hands of company that transformed Little Italy

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New City America tasked with creating identity for downtown

Chula Vista has invested millions of dollars to reinvigorate its historic Third Avenue. Now it's eager to see the downtown area forge an identity.

The corporation that oversees the business district has hired New City America, the company credited with revitalizing San Diego's Little Italy neighborhood, to replicate that success in the South County community.

Today, Third Avenue is a row of bustling restaurants and breweries, hair salons and small retailers.

New City America envisions the area growing with mixed-use development, more public spaces and entrepreneurial activities, such as an art walk and farmers market.

"I see Third Avenue as where Little Italy was in 2000 and more so there (Little Italy), the redevelopment was coming, but it wasn't quite there," said Christopher Gomez, the district manager of the Little Italy Association of San Diego and brand manager with New City America. "There were good bones being laid, which the city of Chula Vista has done, and now comes the fun part of us going in and creating a strong identity and brand with Third Avenue."

New City America took over day-to-day management of the Property-Based Improvement and Business Improvement districts on behalf of the Third Avenue Village Association, according to an Aug. 15 agreement between New City America and the Association. Third Avenue Village is a corporation representing the property owners and businesses of Third Avenue.

“(The Association) looked at what other districts had been doing over the last 25 years and said maybe Little Italy is more the motto that we want to achieve,” said Marco Li Mandri, New City America president.

Li Mandri breaks down the vision:

“One of the successes of Little Italy has been the fact that residents can walk downstairs and be in the middle of the industry, and we see the same scenario playing out on Third Avenue. So, for one, attract new capital, attract new businesses,” he said.

There’s also the idea to recreate the town center around Memorial Park and turn it into a plaza so that it can become “the center of a lot of activities,” much like Little Italy’s 10,000-square-foot European-style piazza on Date Street.

“That’s our goal, to really create the focal point in the middle and then what follows that is more retail, as well as new mixed-use development,” Li Mandri said.

Steve Galasso, a Chula Vista resident who opened Caffè Italia in 1992 on India Street in Little Italy, said he attributes Little Italy’s redevelopment success to New City America. Changes, ranging from getting trash cans in the area to mixed-use buildings, came in the early 1990s through the creation of assessment districts to bring in money for redevelopment. Over the years, the Little Italy Association’s revenue jumped from about \$65,000 to \$3.5 million annually, according to its website.

Revenue generated so far this year from Third Avenue, which New City America is now overseeing, is approximately \$1 million, according to the Village Association’s request for proposal. Revenue is generated from taxation and assessments used to pay for maintenance and activities within the district. Funds are also collected from events, business licenses, grants and in-kind contributions, according to the Village.

The vision for improving the avenue, which runs from E to I streets, comes after the city and the San Diego Association of Governments invested \$14.1 million in streetscape improvements over the course of eight years (2012-2020). The three-phase project enhanced pedestrian access, expanded sidewalks and medians, added seating and bicycle parking, as well as energy-efficient lighting and drought-tolerant landscaping.

Councilmember Jill Galvez, whose District 2 includes Third Avenue, said the city's investment goes hand in hand with New City America's vision for the downtown area.

"They bring incredibly fresh ideas and big plans to continue the renaissance of Third Avenue," she said. "New City is committed to improving the walkability and the socialization of Third Avenue and they're all about multigenerational fun activities."

New City America launched its first event in October with a more family-centric Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) event. On Dec. 11, they will host a holiday event that will include an ugly Christmas sweater contest, free stockings and opportunities for businesses to attract more customers with discounts.

Gomez, who grew up in San Diego and attended grade school in Chula Vista, said the plan focuses on events that highlight Chula Vista's culture.

"Like the Lemon Festival, we recognize that that is a flagship in the community and we want to take it to the next level," he said. "We have also been in conversation about doing a mariachi competition for the local high schools around Memorial Park and some kind of celebration for Mexican Independence Day."

Gomez said he remembers hanging out with friends on Third Avenue after school. For those concerned about gentrification, he said, "that's not what we're here to do."

"What we're here to do is to raise awareness of the existing business community and property and raise the quality of life," he said.