



## **Restoring Nob Hill's Retail Sector**

Synopsis of a site visit and presentation by Robert Gibbs  
Gibbs Planning Group & Urban Retail Institute

*In response to recent trends in Nob Hill's commercial corridor, City Councillor Rey Garduno, council staffer Andrew Webb, and Nob Hill Main Street brought national retail expert Robert Gibbs to the neighborhood on May 21, 2015. Following a district walkthrough with city officials, Mr. Gibbs gave a presentation, Q&A, and focus group session hosted by Steve Paternoster at Scalo. Among those present were Tandi Hufnagel (The Yarn Store), Aaron Sussman (NHMS), Rufus Cohen (Izzy Martin), Ron Halbgewachs and Gary Eyster (Nob Hill Neighborhood Association) who provided notes for the following synopsis:*

Mr Gibbs described the expectations of the modern shopper, ways that successful urban retail districts respond to those expectations, what Nob Hill delivers and doesn't deliver, and what steps can be taken to create retail success in Nob Hill.

### **Overall context**

Only 9% of family income is disposable, US is greatly over-retailed – there is far more retail space than in other industrialized nations 20 ft<sup>2</sup> per person in US compared to 3 ft<sup>2</sup> in Sweden, 75% of sales take place after 5 pm, 85% of shoppers only go to name brand stores, Time is the new luxury – there is no time to shop boutique, Average shoppers spend more money in less time

### **The modern shopper**

75% of shopping today is done by women, mostly after 5pm. Brand loyalty to nationally recognized chains drives a vast majority of retail traffic. Time is now the primary luxury, so a quick, easy, clean, safe and attractive environment is paramount. Parking hassles,

vandalism, un-maintained and sub-standard streets and shoddy storefronts tell shoppers that their money is not well spent in that area. Tourists will shop familiar brand name stores in unique historic environments.

## **The modern urban retail district**

Form follows anchor; anchors can include high-volume retailers, boutique hotels, restaurants, libraries, post offices etc. Retailers and restaurants are curated and balanced so they don't detract from one another. Parking is simple, cheap, and preferably within line-of-sight of the targeted storefront. Street-scapes are clean, quiet, safe and simple and don't detract from signage and display windows. Walkability/pedestrian experience = retail success. Tasteful landscaping communicates good management and bounty but doesn't block storefronts. In historic local-oriented districts like Nob Hill 15% of retail mix should be national brand stores.

## **Nob Hill's strengths and failings**

Nob Hill has a strong "X-factor"--the identity, historic character, charm, and magnetism that can draw people to it. Many anchors and neighborhood features already exist, as does a sector plan and Main Street organization committed to the unique look and feel of the neighborhood. It has a high profile in the region thanks to major public events, quality restaurants, and an iconic look.

But there is a serious set of problems that need to be addressed:

1. Central Avenue needs to be slowed down. The noise, nuisance, and threat to safety area major impediment.
2. Nob Hill is not clean or well maintained, and appears menacing to the vast majority of potential shoppers.
3. Bars and restaurants are out of balance with other uses, and may soon be contributing to a decline in neighborhood quality/property values.
4. Current parking meters create confusion and generate too many negative experiences.
5. Walk-ability, both as an index and as experienced by most shoppers, is poor; sidewalks are narrow and cluttered, street crossing is difficult and dangerous. Retailers are going to places with scores 80+

## **Strategies moving forward**

Immediate:

1. All sectors of the community (city, neighborhood, Main Street, businesses) need to increase their diligence with regards to beautification, maintenance, daily clean up, code enforcement, etc.
2. Slow Central Avenue to 25mph.

3. Replace parking kiosks with modern "smart" parking meters at each space.
4. Increase security

#### Structural changes:

1. Wider sidewalks, more pedestrian crossings, more traffic lights, and public spaces
2. Reduce traffic to one lane each way
3. Encourage more high density housing
4. Strategic public parking structures attached to new retail or housing

#### Organizational:

1. A BID (business improvement district) would help support marketing, upkeep, improvements and security
2. Main Street should increase its role as a liaison with the city for trouble-shooting and maintenance.
3. Identify and landmark (protect) key historic signage

#### Development Strategies and the potential role of a consultant:

1. Identify and attract compatible national brand name stores for key locations
2. Identify other anchors (hotels, libraries etc)
3. Identify funding and organizational mechanisms (Parking Districts, funding mechanisms for parking structures, historic preservation, district marketing, BID strategies)
4. Identify opportunities for redevelopment projects
5. Provide guidelines for city works projects
6. Guide the design of the BRT/ART system to enhance the neighborhood

### **Overall take-aways**

Nob Hill is grossly underperforming. It will continue to move unsustainably towards bars and restaurants (with associated congestion and declining property value) unless a concerted effort is undertaken to develop for retail success. Urban retail is a fine tuned system and cannot be haphazard. Hiring Robert Gibbs for a longer-term analysis and action plan is a vital step toward a solution.

--Rufus Cohen