

## MANY BUILDINGS VACANT IN CALAVERAS COUNTY

Photo 1 of 1 | Zoom Photo +



In recent years, two different restaurants tried to operate in this location on Highway 49 in San Andreas but then ceased operation. The pumps of an abandoned gas station are reflected in the windows of the vacant restaurant building.

*Dana M. Nichols/The Record*

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

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SAN ANDREAS - Twice in the past seven years, experienced business owners have opened a Mexican restaurant in the building at 126 W. Saint Charles St. in San Andreas.

Neither made it.

Now the words "For Sale, Lease," are painted in the window. Reflected in that same window is an abandoned gas station that sits directly across the street.

No one tracks exactly how many vacant commercial buildings there are in Calaveras County. But government officials, real estate professionals and property owners say the number remains high half a decade after the housing crash threw the region's economy into reverse.

"It seems like there are more vacancies. Especially around Angels Camp," said Erick Gutierrez, whose family owns a number of commercial properties in Angels Camp and Murphys.

Gutierrez has vacancies in properties he manages at the north end of Angels Camp on Highway 49 that he says are suitable for a tire dealer, an auto repair shop and a restaurant.

Motorists who drive farther south through Angels Camp on Highway 49 will come to more vacant businesses, including a former Kentucky Fried Chicken at Murphys Grade Road and a storefront in the historic downtown that until last summer was home to the Pickle Barrel Deli.

Although the miserable economy is on everyone's mind, Richard Wilmshurst, the owner of the building formerly rented by the Pickle Barrel Deli, said that isn't the only problem facing businesses in his town.

"I think the bypass has hurt the town," Wilmshurst said, referring to a new section of Highway 4 that opened in 2009, allowing motorists headed from the Valley to tourist destinations such as Murphys or Bear Valley to avoid going through historic downtown Angels Camp.

"That is why the guy quit the Pickle Barrel. His business got cut more than in half," Wilmshurst said.

In recent years, a number of Calaveras County building owners faced with the closure of a tenant's business have opted to buy out the operation or to open a new business rather than let the space go vacant.

That's what happened with a print shop in downtown San Andreas. And soon Valley Springs businessman Guy Meyers said he will open a gun shop to fill a vacant spot in the Nove Plaza shopping center he owns with a group of investors.

"I think the main problem in my end of the county is we just don't have the real estate and construction industry anymore," Meyer said.

Before the housing crash, construction work was putting cash in the pockets of many families in the region, Meyer said.

"Mom-and-pop businesses don't have that to draw from," he said.

Calaveras County Supervisor Cliff Edson, who represents San Andreas and downtown Valley Springs, is intimately familiar with the challenges facing small businesses.

He and his wife, Sylvia, are the owners/operators of Country Cliff's restaurant in San Andreas. And the pair were also among those who made a go of operating a Mexican restaurant at the 126 W. Saint Charles St. site.

"It definitely is getting harder and harder for mom-and-pop businesses," Edson said.

"We don't have the deep pockets that the big corporations have. So when we run into a slow time in the economy or a slow time in business, a lot of times there isn't the operating capital to be able to recover from that."

Edson said a factor in the closure of the Taqueria El Sol, which he and his wife operated at the now-vacant restaurant location, was that it proved to be too much for them to manage both that new operation and the existing Country Cliff's restaurant.

There are some efforts within the county, especially in Angels Camp, to retain existing businesses and extend assistance to new ones.

Destination Angels Camp Development Corporation was founded last year for exactly that purpose. Destination Angels Camp President and CEO Anne Forrest said the new group already has an "opportunity response team" that can assist people seeking to open new businesses.

Among other things, the team can help prospective business owners with finding suitable properties and with navigating through city government, Forrest said.

And new businesses have been opening in the town, Forrest said, even as others have closed or moved. Yet Forrest admits that large catalyst projects - particularly the renovation and reopening of a large historic hotel at the south end of downtown - have yet to happen.

She blames a combination of a weak economy and political uncertainty.

"Everybody is sort of unsettled, because Congress can't get its act together," Forrest said.

Edson, meanwhile, said he is an admirer of what Angels Camp, the county's only incorporated city, is doing to improve its prospects. At his request, the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors will hold a study session March 26 on economic development.

"We need to do that for the rest of the county," Edson said of the effort in Angels Camp to assist prospective businesses.

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