

Evening stroll on the pier

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Bruce Chambers/The Orange County Register

Evening beach-goers stroll the Huntington Beach Pier, a popular place to cool off after a hot summer day. The opening last month of the rebuilt pier has led to a rebirth for the city's downtown businesses, which have benefited from the huge increase in foot traffic/Story, Page B1

CITIES

Pier's opening transforms Huntington

By Jeffrey Miller

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HUNTINGTON BEACH — Business was so slow last year that Gaston Villalba had to close down his deli on Main Street.

But about a month ago, Villalba started a new business across the street, a spacious bar with big-screen televisions and a patio overlooking the main drag. Hurricane's opened to a packed house, and business has been brisk ever since.

Since the opening of the rebuilt Huntington Beach Pier last month, a startling transformation has occurred downtown.

"It's been great," Villalba said.

"There's more people coming down here, coming to the movies, coming to get something to eat, something to drink. Now, there's something down here besides all the old surfer hangouts."

Most nights, even during the week, Main Street and the pier brim with pedestrians. Some are there for a sedate stroll and maybe a little frozen yogurt. Others come for a "pub crawl."

Either way, they're there.

"It seems like Main Street came back alive when they reopened the pier," Gary Ziegler said as he strolled along the pier one evening last week with his wife, Paula.

No hard numbers are available

to measure the pier's impact on downtown businesses. Sales-tax figures for the current quarter will not be out for four to six months. But individual businesses estimate that foot traffic in the area has more than doubled, and many establishments report sales increases of 30 percent to 100 percent.

"I know since the pier opened, we've had a lot more business, especially later at night," said Chenoa Hill, who works at Happy Days Frozen Yogurt on Main Street. "There's a lot more people down here."

Please see DOWNTOWN/5

For Reference

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DOWNTOWN: Pier opening enlivens Huntington Beach

FROM 1

Even local business boosters are surprised by the nighttime crowds that have been flocking to the area.

"It exceeds expectations, especially in the evenings," said Paul Cook, former city administrator and now vice president of the chamber of commerce.

"Maybe it's because it's been so hot, but it's incredible how much it's picked up. Downtown Huntington Beach, the old thing you always heard about it was you can't go down there at night. That's changed overnight."

Since its opening, which drew 500,000 people, the pier has continued to exercise a pull on visitors.

"We come down here a lot of evenings just to go for a walk," said Bill Roth of Huntington Beach. "I just think it's a delightful thing, particularly in this sticky weather."

A flurry of new businesses has accompanied the pier's return. Hurricane's opened its doors the same day as the ribbon-cutting for the pier. So did a Baskin-Robbins ice-cream store across the street. They were preceded by a gym and a bookstore. In the coming months, a microbrewery, a coffeehouse, and a health-food store are expected to set up shop.

Peter Andriet recalled that he was a bit leery this spring when he and his partners leased the second floor of a downtown building for a new pub.

"We'd come down here on a Friday night and it was like a ghost town," Andriet said. "I went out to get a bite to eat last night and the town was packed. It was a party."

Although some visitors come with a specific destination in mind,

others just amble along a promenade that stretches from the tip of the pier through the first few blocks of Main Street. Some stop and admire the sunset, others check out the surfers who shoot the pier well past dark. Some relax with a caffe latte. Some want to quaff something stronger.

"A lot of friends I have in Long Beach, they're coming down here now," said Jeff Phillips, 31, of Huntington Beach. "Huntington Beach seems to be taking over the younger-crowd party atmosphere."

The pier is not the lone factor in the popularity of downtown. The weather has cooperated much more than last year. And visitors say redevelopment projects — improved lighting, widened sidewalks for cafes — make the area more comfortable.

Alice Klein of Fountain Valley said she can hardly wait for the city to complete its redevelopment with projects such as Main Pier, Phase II, to be built on the north side of Main Street at Pacific Coast Highway.

"I think when they get the rest of this done, you won't even be able to move down here," she said.

The idea of a bustling, beach-area commercial strip dotted with bars, restaurants, clothes stores, cookie shops and yogurt parlors naturally draws comparisons to the thriving Belmont Shore area of Long Beach. That's no accident.

"Belmont Shore was the prototype," Cook said. "It's a couple of years from being Belmont Shore, but that's what I visualize it becoming ... although our parking situation is much better than theirs."