

No Pier Means No Customers

By Greg Hernandez

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Summer on the seashore minus the Huntington Beach Municipal Pier has left a definite void in traditional activities.

No more sunset strolls over the wooden planks, no fishing from the end of the pier, no more snacks at the Captain's Galley, and no more beers at Neptune's Locker.

For Main Street merchants, it has also meant no more cus-

tomers.

In the heat of long, dull afternoon, downtown business people talked openly about their frustrations as they've watched their businesses slump since the pier was declared unsafe and closed to the public July 12, 1988.

Compounding their woes is the construction of several redevelopment projects, which have torn up Main Street and led

many to believe downtown is off limits.

"This summer has gone worse than we had planned. We don't really attribute it to the reconstruction going on as much as the pier being closed," said Tom Chaney, manager of Chuck Dent Surf Center.

For some businesses, such as Hayward Surfboards, the situation is desperate.

"There's been a 70 percent

"Because of the pier and redevelopment, we're 40 percent off what we usually do this time of year. No one wants to come downtown and walk in the dirt."

— Business Owner Michael Channani

drop in business since the pier closed. Things really got bad in the winter. This may be our last

summer on Main Street," said store manager Lance Varon, standing inside an empty shop,

something unheard of in years gone by.

"Everybody thinks downtown is closed. People will call or come by and say, 'I thought you were closed.'"

"On an average Saturday, we used to sell five or six new surfboards. Now, we might sell one or two," said Varon, who has worked at Hayward for six years.

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Blues

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Even next week's Op Pro Championships offer little hope. "Business will probably increase, but not substantially. It doesn't seem like the crowds come up off the beach anymore," Varon said.

Lisa Dellano has owned Dawg Days, a beach clothing store on Main Street, for a year.

Dellano's business is in a converted stairwell. It's so small, she spends her afternoons sitting outside getting a tan, giving customers room to look around.

Lamenting on the closing of the pier, she said simply, "It killed us."

She added that the misconception of downtown being closed has been a further detriment.

Michael Channani, owner of four beach clothing shops on Pacific Coast Highway near Main Street, still bristles when talking about how no pier and redevelopment has affected his businesses.

"Because of the pier and redevelopment, we're 40 percent off what we usually do this time of year. No one wants to come downtown and walk in the dirt.

"I have enough business to keep me going, but that doesn't keep me satisfied.

"If the pier was open, on a sunny day like this, you would have 20 customers in here," Channani said as he glanced at the four customers browsing through his shop.

"The key is building that pier. That will bring people in."

Some merchants refuse to let the situation get them down.

Larry Lawrence, owner of The Bread Crumb restaurant, saw his business drop off by 45 percent once the pier closed.

Down but not out, Lawrence remodeled his Main Street eatery, which he has owned since 1986, and said his business is experiencing a resurgence.

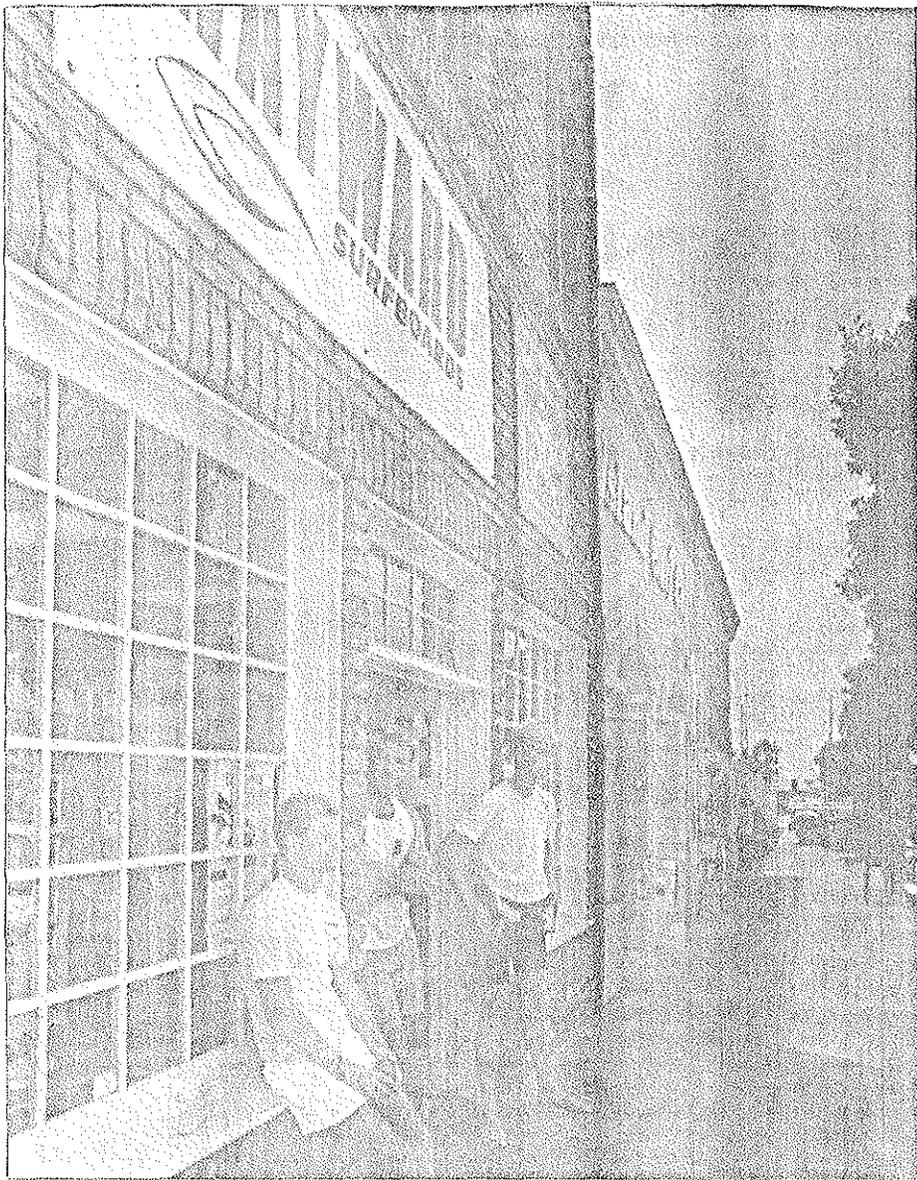
"We started serving breakfast two weeks ago and business has doubled. I think the new look has made people a little curious."

Still, until downtown redevelopment is complete and the pier is rebuilt, Lawrence knows it will be difficult to reach his former level of success.

"Local people are really supporting everyone downtown. I'll be doing all I can to hang on. I know we'll make it."

Through all of the upheaval, established restaurants in the area seem to be faring the best.

Jan's Health Bar, located in back of George's Surf Center in the first block of Main Street, has stayed as busy as ever with



Independent Photo By Ed Compean

SUMMER DOLDRUMS — Hayward Surfboard employees Tim Fisher, Lance Varon and Pat Lien stand around in front of the store waiting

for customers. Sometimes, they spend the entire morning just hanging out, contrary to the way business was before the pier was closed.

plenty of regular customers to rely on.

The same can be said of The Sugar Shack, a small, intimate restaurant on the second block of the street.

Owned by Michelle Turner, the eatery has enjoyed a steady stream of regulars.

"My customers are very loyal and say they'll find me no matter where I am," said Turner cheerfully.

The most disruptive redevelopment project for the merchants has been the Main Parking/Retail Project on the street's second block.

The project will include a 834-space parking structure and 3,200 square feet of retail space.

Work on the project, to be built by the Ray Wilson Company of Pasadena, is expected to be completed by September 1990, according to Eric Nicoll,

redevelopment specialist.

Nicoll said the city has made a good faith effort to let the public know that downtown is still open through newspaper advertisements. He said the bad economic times merchants are experiencing are only temporary.

"Hopefully, down the road things will get better. Sales may be dipping now, but a year from now, we'll have all these new things and a new Main Street."