

Chris Shake: What you should know about Fisherman's Wharf

By Chris Shake

Guest commentary – Monterey County Herald

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A recent Herald guest commentary (Sept. 26) regarding Monterey's Waterfront Master Plan was misleading, totally inaccurate and made some really unfair comparisons. It seemed to be a surrogate for an anti-wharf agenda that could really damage an important historical landmark, our tourism industry and the local economy. So, of course, I am very concerned.

What appeared to be an argument to move ahead with a plan to reduce parking along the waterfront contained many erroneous and ridiculous statements, such as "Fisherman's Wharf may not be an economic engine for the community of Monterey" and that it's not a "community asset," as well as wrongful accusations concerning the wharf merchants who "have enjoyed city-subsidized parking for their customers for years." According to the editorial, written by Bob Evans, Jim Love, Hans Jannasch, William Scannell and Bruce Zanetta, nearly all of the rent the city receives from the wharf merchants goes back into maintenance of the wharf, and the waterfront parking lots are not making money either.

First of all, I love Monterey. It's the only place I've ever called home and I wouldn't want to be associated with Fisherman's Wharf if it truly was detrimental to the city, but the real numbers reflect something else. According to Assistant City Manager Hans Ulser, the city of Monterey received over \$1.3 million in rent from wharf merchants in the last fiscal year and spent \$187,685 on maintenance costs. Parking Superintendent Wayne Dalton reported that the waterfront parking lots generated over \$2.2 million in revenue with only \$510,000 spent for administrative and attendant expenses, plus a nominal amount that is annually "earmarked" for maintenance in the budget. There's no question that Fisherman's Wharf is an economic engine for our community.

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In fact, Monterey is receiving a higher return from the waterfront than from any other city-owned asset in its real estate portfolio.

Fisherman's Wharf is one of Monterey's top three destinations, attracting over 2 million tourists each year. Its businesses provide hundreds of local jobs, a huge tax revenue and give back to the community in many other ways. The number of nonprofits that wharf merchants support are too numerous to list, but include The Salvation Army, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Surfrider Foundation, Save Our Shores, Save the Whales, our local schools, libraries, youth sports, animal shelters, homeless shelters and food pantries.

The Sept. 26 commentary appears to work in tandem with Planning Commissioner Chairman Bill McCrone's efforts against Fisherman's Wharf merchants, as he seems to hold some sort of discord with the wharf or perhaps he just desires more open space with fewer tourists around. Whatever his motive, he has portrayed wharf merchants as somehow wrongfully benefitting from some sort of backroom, dishonest deals with past City Councils. These public accusations that the council members who approved the lease terms were all corrupt are offensive and an insult to our former city staff, City Council, mayors, local merchants and even the voters.

McCrone has openly stated that he wouldn't mind seeing the wharf destroyed and he has alternately called for chain restaurants to move onto the wharf. It would be no surprise if he favored conditions that made business on Fisherman's Wharf untenable for local merchants. That would be a travesty!

For over 50 years there has not been a dark building on the wharf. Some are closed temporarily for renovation, but unlike other areas of the city that struggle to fill space in this age of Internet shopping, the public continues to migrate to the wharf. Sure, it could be spruced up a bit, but its magnetic allure to so many is undeniable.

A reduction in parking spaces in the waterfront parking lot is an enormous economic issue for wharf merchants. The current setup could definitely be improved and the waterfront parking lots could have a more convenient entrance and exit. There is less free parking or "city-subsidized" parking near the wharf than perhaps any other business district on the Peninsula. Free parking abounds just blocks from the aquarium and all along Alvarado and throughout Monterey, but nobody is complaining — nor should they.

Wharf merchants are really partners with the city. They pay rent, they pay for all the repairs to the buildings, they pay for all of their infrastructure, their pilings and their decks. In addition to the rent and parking income, millions of dollars are generated in sales tax, annual business license renewals, property taxes and other fees that the city benefits from. This nonsense that the city is getting a poor return for an incomparable real estate asset is just plain wrong and does not represent reality.

The Planning Commission has scheduled a public study session on Oct. 14 and I encourage everyone who is concerned about the future of Fisherman's Wharf to attend.

Chris Shake is owner of Chris Shake Enterprises, The Old Fisherman's Grotto and The Peninsula Fish Market, and co-owner of The Fish Hopper in Monterey.