

Main Street businesses pass assessment

BY MELODY HANATANI
Daily Press Staff Writer

MAIN STREET Landlords of this down-home commercial area narrowly approved the formation of an assessment district on Tuesday, pledging to contribute to a pot of money that will pay for enhanced sidewalk maintenance and ornamental tree lighting.

Approximately half of the 157 property owners that line Main Street from Pico Boulevard to the southern city limits replied to the ballot question that was mailed out in June, roughly 57 percent of whom voted in favor. The passage of the bid, which was backed by the Main Street Business Improvement Association (MSBIA), will lead to the formation of a sidewalk and lighting improvement fund to which all landlords will have to contribute a combined total of more than \$88,000 a year.

While nearly 60 percent of property owners supported the assessment, the election was tighter than indicated by the number of yes votes, their total assessment accounting for just \$260 more than the opposition. Among the proponents of the district were City Hall and the Santa Monica City Parking Authority, whose portion represents about \$7,800.

Main Street became the second commercial area in as many weeks to see its own assessment district approved, the first coming earlier this month when landlords in



WALKING THE STREET: Business owners on Main Street approved a new assessment that is expected to raise \$88,000 for sidewalk cleaning and ornamental lighting. City Hall and the Santa Monica City Parking Authority represents about \$7,800 of the assessment.

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Downtown gave the nod to a new property based assessment district, a considerably larger enterprise that will use more than \$3.6 million to cover enhanced maintenance and customer service.

"This means we'll be able to have an improved sidewalk cleaning program," Gary

Gordon, the executive director of the MSBIA, said. "It means that the festoon lighting program will continue and ultimately be improved."

The added charges from the new district will be reflected in the next property tax bill issued by the county. The assessments will be

levied according to the benefit the property receives.

The fund will maintain the current level of sidewalk and tree lighting care along Main Street, both of which are currently made pos-

SEE MAIN STREET PAGE 10

Dominican legends make their California debut

BY CHRISTINA YOON
Special to the Daily Press

SM PIER For the Dominican band Bachata Roja Legends, tonight's Twilight Dance Series concert is not just another show. It is a symbol of how far their beloved music has come.

First popular in rural areas and the cabarets of the Dominican Republic in the 1950's, the "bachata" style of music was frowned upon by the country's elite. It was banned by respectable venues and boycotted by major media outlets.

Years later, the four members of Bachata Roja Legends, some of the most influential pioneers of the genre, have made a journey to the Pacific Coast. The famed "bachateros" spoke through a translator about the long road to get here.

"It's like a dream for me," said band member "El Chivo Sin Ley," whose real name is Isidro Cabrera. "It's also exhilarating to feel so honored and appreciated. We bachateros were considered the dregs of society — the lowest of the low. Nobody decent wanted to be associated with us. Now look where we are. It's not something I ever imagined."

The guitar-heavy bachata style gleans influences from different genres such as Cuban bolero and Mexican ranchera music. The seasoned members of Bachata Roja Legends describe it as a mix representing the highs and lows of musical emotion.

"There are two different elements to our sound," Edilio Paredes said. "One is 'Amargue' — which translates as bitterness but in terms of music means something like 'the blues' ... The other element is the more

festive. We grew up playing in bars and cabarets, and so our music has also taken on some of that party atmosphere. We play so that people can dance."

The members of Bachata Roja Legends grew up creating and playing music together. Paredes and Ramon Cordero have been musical peers for over 50 years, playing in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic as children.

They were joined in the 1960s by El Chivo. Even the band's youngest member, Joan Soriano, was around the founding members since he was a young boy.

"It's true, we are like family. Edilio's son is even the godfather of my son," Soriano said. "All we bachateros — whether from the old generation or new — know each other personally and have performed together at one time or another. We know what each of us

has been through, so this helps us understand each other musically as well."

Cordero, Paredes and El Chivo are often given much of the credit for making bachata music a celebrated category of Latin music. In the 1980s, the three formed a popular weekly event called "Lunes de Amargue" in the Dominican Republic.

"It's the first time I remember that doctors and lawyers and people with money and education began openly coming to bachata performances," El Chivo said of their collaboration.

"The success of 'Lunes de Amargue' was the first step that helped Bachata overcome censorship in the Dominican Republic," Paredes said.

Today, the musicians have toured across

SEE CONCERT PAGE 10

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Politics harmed City Hall and Chamber relationship

FROM CHAMBER PAGE 1

Rosen said City Hall's involvement will not be a conflict of interest, stressing that the chamber will continue to advocate for the business community regardless of council's position on issues.

"The role of the chamber is to reflect the concerns of the business members and their issues," Rosen said. "We may not always be sitting on the same side of the table as (the council)."

Both entities have worked in concert on various issues since the disbandment of the PAC, including the anti-panhandling campaign, the non-smoking campaign and the Land Use and Circulation Element, the general plan update.

While the chamber has kept its hands off of endorsements, it has kept up some involvement in politics, launching a new advocacy site in April called "Santa Monica Votes," providing a forum for its members to express their opinions on issues being deliberated by the council. The chamber board

also voted to oppose the Residents' Initiative to Fight Traffic, which seeks to place caps on commercial development.

"When you have a strong relationship between the city and chamber, it speaks volumes," Rosen said.

Paul Hortobagyi, the new board chairman, said the chamber has one of the best bonds with City Hall at the present moment, crediting it to City Manager Lamont Ewell, who came to Santa Monica in 2006.

Ewell said among his objectives as city manager was to strengthen the relationships with the neighborhoods and the chamber, the former achieved through the community budget forums.

"Having a good relationship with the chamber was equally important," Ewell said. "I like to believe we advanced that effort where we're working more closely on potential policies that come out such as the ban on plastic bags and the non-smoking policies of the city."

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Decorative lighting and clean sidewalks credited with giving Main Street unity

FROM MAIN STREET PAGE 3

sible through a grant the association received from City Hall last year. The estimated \$85,000 grant was used to pay for the decorative lights, extra sidewalk sweeping in addition to the biannual cleanings provided by City Hall every year, and a consultant who studied the feasibility of an assessment district. The MSBIA paid for the enhanced services before it received the grant.

All is needed to keep Main Street competitive amongst the other shopping destinations in the area.

"I think our biggest challenge is to brand Main Street as a shopping district, as a cohesive neighborhood," Olivia Brown, the owner of day spa Bey's Garden and association board member, said. "Part of what helps us do that from the visual perspective is the lighting."

Some property owners remained skeptical about some of the benefits that would be reaped from the formation of an assessment district.

Lee Johnson, the owner of a mixed-use building off Pacific Street, said that while he enjoyed the festoon lights, he opted against the district because of the sidewalk cleaning

element, noting that he has hardly seen any sweepers on his block the past few years.

"I'm always having them cleaned," Johnson said. "I see them spend a lot more attention down by the Farmers' Market (at Ocean Park Boulevard)."

Johnson said his building is located in a more "sleepy" area of Main Street where there is considerably less retail. Had the bid only included the lighting, Johnson said he would've been more inclined to vote yes.

The lights are meant to evoke a sense of unity on the street, creating a warmer and friendly environment, Gordon said.

During two community outreach meetings earlier this year in which property owners learned about the assessment district, the association shut off the festoon bulbs, showing the differences, which Gordon described as being "stark."

"Unless a particular store has a large storefront and keeps the lights on, a large portion of the block could be dark and you lose any kind of effect of overall warmth or unity you have when the lights are on," Gordon said.

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Bachata musicians keep close to their roots

FROM CONCERT PAGE 3

Europe, Latin American and the United States separately, and have performed together in Chicago and Baltimore on previous stops of their current tour.

Tonight will be the first time that the members have performed in California. They will team up with fellow bachata musician Puerto Plata and an extensive backup band.

"We weren't sure when we got started if it would be possible with all the visa issues and coordinating the different artists," Benjamin de Menil, the band's producer, said. "Until recently I only knew Ramon and Chivo from

scratchy old records — they sound amazing live."

They hope to garner new fans and expose even those who are already familiar with bachata to the roots of the music.

"So many people know only the modern bachata played in dance halls today," said Paredes. "I want people to know where bachata came from."

And no matter where they are, Paredes said, the Legends have one main priority in mind when performing.

"We're going to play bachata. Let's see what happens."

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