

# The Mercury News

## Downtown shops unite to gain more exposure in community

**By Kristina Peterson**  
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Owners of several boutiques located off the beaten track in downtown Palo Alto have marshaled forces in an effort to attract more shoppers.

The Palo Alto Downtown Boutiques Association, which formed earlier this month, will focus on cross-promoting smaller stores in downtown's eastern periphery, said Charina Cabanayan, owner of Bloom Butik on Bryant Street.

"Our purpose is to tell people that there are options downtown," she said.

The group consists of six apparel stores and one design gallery.

"We're all independently-owned boutiques, and it makes sense to pool our efforts," said Esther Shih, owner of the Far East Living boutique on University Avenue.

Shih said people ask several times each week whether her Asian-inspired apparel store is new, even though she opened it two years ago. The store's door front on the stretch of University Avenue east of Cowper Street is "a tough location" for drawing foot traffic, Shih acknowledged.

Shih, who describes herself as a "high-tech escapee," said her custom-tailoring apparel business has managed to survive thanks to help from the business community, which directs family and friends there.

Even actress Michelle Pfeiffer and her husband managed to find the shop a couple of weeks ago when they bought matching cashmere ensembles. "I was so tickled," she said.

Irina Vlassova, owner of Fashion Passion on University Avenue, said the Stanford Shopping Center is a big challenge to boutiques in Palo Alto, which doesn't have as many tourists as some other cities where such shops do business.

"It's locally oriented," said Vlassova, who runs another store in Hawaii and used to do business in Las Vegas.

"You have to have different inventory much more often than in a place where people come, stay five days and leave," she said.

And she noted that at roughly \$5 to \$7 per square foot each month, Palo Alto's rent is higher than rent in both Hawaii and on the main Las Vegas Strip. Still, Vlassova said, her return customer list is constantly growing.

City Council Member Bern Beecham said he is happy to see the boutique owners working together to increase their visibility.

"That's part of what makes downtown Palo Alto different from shopping centers that have the same old names," he said. "A rich variety of small stores is important to our reputation."

The group's first event, scheduled for June 9, includes a fashion show displaying the shops' merchandise, as well as a silent auction. All of the auction's proceeds will be donated to the non-profit Downtown Streets Team, which employs the city's homeless population to maintain downtown streets and sidewalks.

The city's business improvement district will sponsor the fundraising event by picking up the permit and street closure fees, district president Sherry Bijan said.

"It promotes business for everyone," Bijan added.

She said the district plans to collaborate with the new association at future events as well. Plans for a promenade down University Avenue in July were recently expanded to include Far East Living and its neighbors.

"We're always there to support them," she said.

E-mail Kristina Peterson at [kpetersondailynews@comcast.com](mailto:kpetersondailynews@comcast.com).