

A cultural center odyssey

12 years, \$22 million dollars and community support have changed the face of downtown Morgan Hill

By [Hollister Free Lance](#) - December 6, 2002
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As the Morgan Hill Community & Cultural Center opens its doors with pirouetting ballerinas and doo-wop legend Little Anthony, officials from other cities and counties in the Bay area are asking: How did you do it? How did you make it happen?

The answers are civic doggedness, a willingness to rearrange the town and \$22 million to cover all of the costs.

Along the way, an historic elementary school was rescued from becoming a Spaghetti Factory, the local community theater group gave up performing in storefronts and an entire church congregation relocated to a new home.

Mayor Dennis Kennedy likes to talk about the solutions that were negotiated with so many stakeholders:

- The citizens of Morgan Hill got a new community and cultural center;
- Morgan Hill Historical Society saved an early church and school building;
- Carden Academy school vacated a strip mall for that same school building;
- Morgan Hill Unified School District made nearly \$2 million on the sale of the land and used it to buy an elementary school site;
- Temple Emmanuel is getting a church that is twice the size;
- South Valley Community Theater found a permanent home; and,
- Gavilan College got a new, downtown site.

Building Morgan Hill's first public building in three decades "was not easy, but there were a lot of winners in the whole process," said Kennedy. "I know there are still members of the community that think we did it wrong, but this is a wonderful facility."

Problems on the Corner

No one remembers quite when the idea started in motion, but Kennedy remembers it as one of his campaign points in his 1990 run for city office.

“It was a wonderful site for a public building,” he said.

However, there were three big problems sitting at the corner of Monterey and Dunne. Two of Morgan Hill’s oldest buildings, a school and a church, stood on the property – and historical preservationists cared very much about their future. Another feature of the site was an abandoned gas station with contamination problems.

Competing interests circled for the next four years. The fate of the old and vacant Morgan Hill Elementary School wavered between destruction and sale, and it almost became a restaurant, according to Gloria Pariseau, president of the Morgan Hill Historical Society.

The school was even considered for becoming the community center, but rejected on the basis of size. The 1920’s church was still in active use and now is owned by the Temple Emmanuel Apostolic Assembly.

Getting the Vision Right

In the mid-1990s the City launched a process in the community to determine local needs. Citizens debated possibilities and priorities, weighing in on affordable housing, debt, roads, recreation, infrastructure and economic development. The need for community facilities bubbled to the top.

An advisory vote held to determine whether citizens would pay for their vision. An overwhelming 70 percent of the voters gave their approval for extending the city’s Redevelopment Agency (RDA) to bring in \$147 million – primarily for community facilities.

Before the visioning process, a less-specific effort to extend the RDA had gone down in defeat. With the RDA extended, the City paid \$1.9 million to the Morgan Hill Unified School District for the northeast corner of Monterey and Dunne.

“It was a win for both of us,” said school Superintendent Carolyn McKennan. “They now have a great downtown location and it allowed us to move to another location.”

The district used \$1.6 million of the money to buy property for the new Barrett elementary school.

More Land, More Costs

When the City drafted its first budget estimate in 1998, the center was smaller in size and estimated at \$7.5 million, according to David Bischoff, community development director. The purchase of the church property and the gas station property at Fifth and Monterey not only added an unanticipated \$1.5 million to the budget, it suddenly made space for a larger – and more costly – center to be built on the site.

For a time, the corner of Monterey and Dunne became a curious sight. The church was shrink-wrapped in plastic (termites) and hoisted off its foundation for a short move to the north. An old Shell station was the site of petroleum pollution, which had to be cleaned up and carted away.

One at a time, the pieces began to fall into place.

The City went calling on developers, trying to find one willing to deal with the school properly. Eventually it was sold for one dollar to Custom One Construction, which was willing to move it to Hale and Llagas streets.

The City provided a \$600,000 loan and grant package for a rehab that would preserve the school's character and make it into a functional building.

Carden Academy, a private school, abandoned its location in a strip mall near a taqueria to move into the refurbished building.

"Children are in the halls, laughing and learning again," said Brigitte Heiser, the school's marketing director. "It's a beautiful building and a wonderful learning environment. We open it to the public as much as we can."

Trading Spaces

The congregation of Temple Emmanuel agreed to swap its old church and property in exchange for \$900,000 and a new site on Butterfield Boulevard. The trade is allowing it to build a new church twice the size of the old one.

"The congregation is excited," said Jacob Villarreal, the church's treasurer.

Currently, the congregation holds Sunday services at the Mt. Madonna YMCA while waiting for its new building to be completed late next year.

The original church building is undergoing its own transformation, soon to become Morgan Hill's first performing arts venue, the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

A 4,000-square-foot stage has been added to the church, while the chancel will become seating for 187 in an "intimate theater." The playhouse is scheduled for completion in late January, with the first production in February.

The South Valley Community Theater will become the resident company of the playhouse, abandoning a 30-year history of staging performances in temporary venues such as storefronts, high schools and the Pumpkin Patch.

"Audiences didn't know how to find us and it has been difficult to choose shows because we didn't know where we were going to put them on," said SVCT Board Member Peter Mandel.

Gavilan Moves Up

The next alliance forged was between the City and Gavilan College. Gavilan lacked the funds for a major capital expenditure for a downtown building, but it could pay rent. The City was restricted to capital improvements in its use of RDA funds, and it needed operating income.

In this marriage with a five-year renewable lease, the City built the building and Gavilan pays \$135,000 in annual rent, according to Bischoff.

It wasn't just the financial arrangements that made Gavilan an attractive tenant. The center's designers wanted the activity and energy that a college campus brings.

Gavilan president Steve Kinsella said the new location provides a permanency that allows the school to develop programs to meet specific needs of Morgan Hill.

Opposition Revisited

As the center prepares for its grand opening, some of the people who voiced concerns during the development process are revisiting their positions.

Evelyn Kobayashi of Morgan Hill, who was originally concerned about the location of the children's play area, was pleased it moved in the final design. She retains her concern about lack of parking, which city officials acknowledge. For high traffic events, they plan to divert overflow parking to the train station lot on Dept Street two blocks to the north.

Brooke Bailey of Morgan Hill is pleased that the large Hiram Morgan Hill Room was scaled down from 6,000 to 4,000 square feet.

"It got so grandiose for a small town; it needed perspective," said Bailey. "I hope it meets everyone's dreams and hopes, but there is still no accommodation for teens." Morgan Hill architect Charles Weston, who says he "expressed concern on 85 percent of the project" feels that some of his concerns may have been incorporated.

"Generally, I like it." He said. "The issues are over and I'm looking forward to using it."

Ready for Launch

Final construction touches at the center continue, working towards opening deadlines.

The opening event, the Mayor's Ball benefit gala on Saturday is sold out. Grand Opening Day with the ribbon cutting and time capsule is Sunday. It will be followed by a full week of celebratory activities. (See related article.)

"This is not a city building, but a community building," said Julie Spier, recreation and community services manager.

The opening also launches the City's marketing program to bring in weddings, birthday parties, events, meetings and classes. In its first year of operation, operating expenses are expected to be approximately \$990,000, with revenue at \$720,000.

The Center now has its own web site at: www.mhcommunitycenter.com, with a calendar of events and facility details.

"Good things take a long time, and this is an example of that," said Kennedy. "I think it is very successful."