

# Listening To Business

Business Walk ~ Summary Evaluation

AUBURN March 11, 2010

Presented by: **THE AUBURN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, CITY OF AUBURN AND COUNTY OF PLACER**



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## “LISTENING TO BUSINESS” BACKGROUND

The Auburn Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors designated March 11<sup>th</sup> as Listening To Business Day. This inaugural ‘Listening To Business’ event, a partnership with the City of Auburn and Placer County, was organized to personally visit as many business representatives as possible in a span of two hours. The listening tour and business walk was intended to define trends in the current economy and ask for candid feedback on what the Chamber, the City of Auburn and Placer County can do to support business and, in doing, strengthen the local economy.



A total of **87 business and government representatives** were paired randomly and **visited at least 534 businesses in the Auburn Area**. 94 of the businesses visited did not have identifying information with the survey forms submitted and **9 have chosen to take the survey online**. A mix of retail, office and industrial locations throughout the greater Auburn community were visited during the fast-paced two hour business walk.

The business feedback, commentary and data has been compiled and will be an important component to help community business leaders and local government guide their time, talent and resources to support programs and policies that will match up with what was heard as we *“listened to business”*.

## SUMMARY RESULTS

The economic challenges, nationally and throughout California was acknowledged by business owners and managers, however, businesses interviewed strongly hold a positive view of the local business climate. Approximately 82 percent of those interviewed said that business is okay or better.

There were also some common issues and themes that were expressed in both the City of Auburn and the unincorporated area of the Auburn business community in Placer County. Signage and promotion are vital assets to each business and the regulations and accessibility to these assets need to be looked at and considered by appropriate parties.

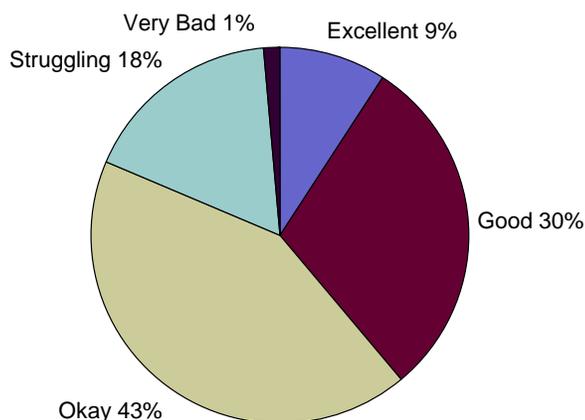
The balance of this summary includes additional detail on the responses to each of the (3) three interviewers conversational questions: How is business?, What do you like about doing business in this area?, What can be done to improve business?, as well as strategies that the City of Auburn, County of Placer and the Auburn Chamber of Commerce are taking to further improve the local business climate.

## HOW IS BUSINESS?

The first question was “**How is Business?**” Business owners and managers expressed their thoughts and the results showed:

- 9% believed that business was EXCELLENT, and couldn't be better
- 30% felt that business was GOOD but could be better
- 43% felt business was OKAY
- 18% were STRUGGLING and their business was barely surviving
- 1% (or 6 of the 440 interviewed) of business owners felt business was VERY BAD and they have plans to cease operations.

**It's very exciting that 82% of businesses contacted on the “Walk About” felt that business was OKAY, GOOD or EXCELLENT. Still, some businesses are finding it a challenge to stay viable.**



- Those responding in the “VERY BAD” and/or that they would be closing their doors in the near future category were located around Kemper and Atwood Roads, in the Auburn Town Center, on Nevada Street and in the East Lincoln/Bowman Area.
- Businesses that cited themselves as “STRUGGLING” were located in a mixture of areas. The Downtown area had 23 businesses that indicated they were struggling. Grass Valley Highway had 16. “Other” areas had a total of 37 struggling businesses, with the East Lincoln/Bowman Area highest with 10.

The struggling businesses in downtown were primarily retail, with some dining establishments, and they cited that sales have been steadily going down for the last two years and attribute this decline to the current economic climate. In the East Lincoln Way and Bowman area, many of the businesses stating they were struggling, were again primarily retail with a few food establishments; some reported that most of their business is seasonal and have experienced fairly normal sales during their selected season, other businesses were having a hard time getting people to walk in, and most said customers just were not spending as much.

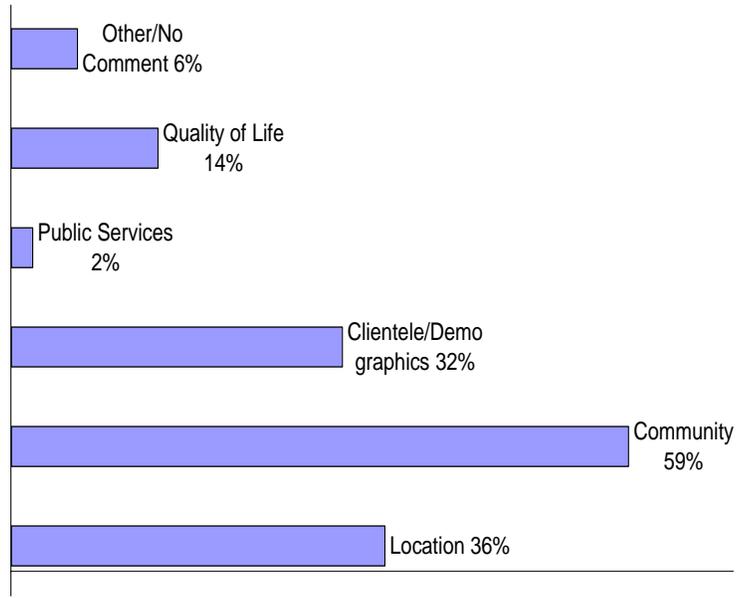
## WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT DOING BUSINESS IN AUBURN?

When each of the 440 businesses interviewed was asked the question *What Do You Like About Doing Business In This Area?*, they were not given a list of multiple choice answers, only asked to comment freely. The ‘scribe’ of the team noted comments and then condensing their comments to best fit one of the following options: Location, Community, Clientele/Demographics, City or County Services/Activities, Quality of Life or Other. The response most business cited, when asked what they like about doing business in Auburn, was **COMMUNITY** with **59 percent!** There was an overall feeling expressed that the ‘small town’ atmosphere really made doing business in the Auburn Area special.

**Almost equally important to business owners/managers was their location and the people.**

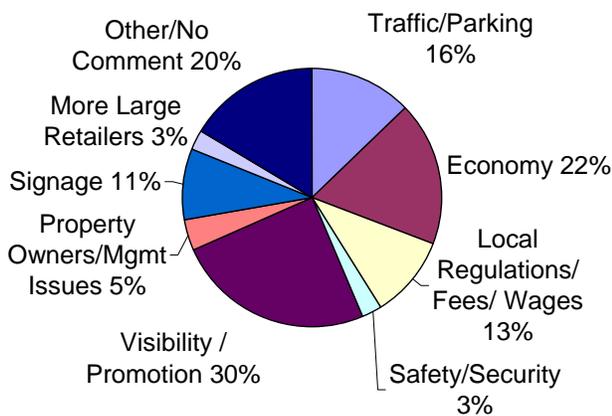
Whether it was their specific location in Auburn or the area itself, businesses cited that they liked that Auburn had what they needed right here. The visibility of Auburn being accessed from Grass Valley Highway (Hwy 49) and from Interstate 80 gives Auburn access to drive-by customers. Another draw to having a business in the Auburn area is that many of the employees and owners live in the area... people can work close to where they live. Many cited that Auburn is not as congested as neighboring towns/cities and close to the sea and to ski.

Many of those interviewed were born and/or raised in Auburn and know many members of our community. Others cited that Auburn's people are very friendly and welcoming. The clientele of Auburn businesses are very loyal and family-like. Relationships with customers, clients and the 'home-town' community have given Auburn business owners the desire to engage in commerce in the area.



**WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE BUSINESS?**

It was apparent from the comments made, by both business and government leaders that participated in the business walk on March 11, 2010, that Auburn business is keenly aware of the impacts of national and state issues affecting the local economy. When business was asked the first question "How's Business?" 62 percent cited the economy in general as directly impacting their business, and commented how the economy has altered how they do business daily.



However, when asked "What can be done to improve business?" 22 percent, in fact, felt the economy could be effectively impacted locally. Suggestions made, and/or improvements needed included: greater visibility/promotion (30 percent), issues with property owners or management issues needing resolution (5 percent), and others had (non-specific) issues with local regulations and fees (13 percent). While there were numerous suggestions for how to improve the business climate locally, many were quick to add comments expressing how pleased they were to be a part of the Auburn community.

Other suggestions, repeated numerous times, to improve business included:

- Fill vacant business
- More local events
- More networking / business referrals
- More destination marketing / tourism promotion

## INSIGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS

- Out of 440 business interviewed, 261 said they loved the ‘small town’ feel of Auburn
- Of the 163 businesses interviewed along the Hwy 49 corridor, many focused on ways to improve economic challenges though enhanced visibility and promotion to drive more business activity.
- An overall similar theme of ‘Think Auburn First’ was expressed often throughout the community.
- Businesses view the community very positively and optimistic about Auburn’s future.



## RECENT ACTIVITIES AND FOLLOW UP BY CITY, COUNTY AND CHAMBER

City, County and Chamber staff have already started the process to respond to comments and questions following the “Listening To Business” walk. The City of Auburn has recently embarked on a comprehensive process to compile in a “one-stop source” document ~ the economic development and business support programs coordinated by numerous independent organizations within the City. This collaborative approach will encourage and facilitate a stronger consistent economic development plan for Auburn. The County of Placer / Office of Economic Development has been working closely with the City and Chamber on strategies to market the Auburn Airport Business Park in an effort to attract business and industry, generate new jobs, and expand awareness of business opportunities in Auburn. The Auburn Chamber of Commerce is utilizing “small business focus groups” to reach out and assist local business, and the Chamber is expanding use of “electronic media” to encourage an open dialogue among business, residents and local government.

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The Auburn Chamber of Commerce, City of Auburn and County of Placer thank all of the 87 volunteers who took their valuable time to participate in gathering information, to the 534 business that took amount to welcome us and to the 440 businesses for participating and providing feedback, during the Auburn Business Walk, as we **“listened to business”** on March 11, 2010.

**Auburn Chamber**  
Of Commerce  
[www.auburnchamber.net](http://www.auburnchamber.net)  
530-885-5616  
Bruce Cosgrove, CEO

**City of Auburn**  
[www.auburn.ca.gov](http://www.auburn.ca.gov)  
530-823-4211  
Bob Richardson, City Manager

**Placer County**  
[www.placer.ca.gov](http://www.placer.ca.gov)  
530-889-4010  
Dave Snyder, Eco. Dev. Dir.

