

Around Town

THE SOUND AND THE FURY ...

Downtown Palo Alto will thump and vibrate with the sounds of jazz, rock, blues, folk and choral music on June 19, when the city holds its third annual **“World Music Day.”** This year, however, the one sound that will be missing from the cosmopolitan symphony is the honking of cars. That’s because the city plans to take the event to the next level by closing **University Avenue** to traffic — a proposal that hasn’t always been music to the merchants’ ears. The most notable recent snafu was the **“Palo Alto Promenade,”** a 2007 event in which the city closed University Avenue between 4 and 10 p.m. on a Friday. The road closure created traffic jams on surrounding streets, including Alma and High streets and Hamilton Avenue. The mirthful street atmosphere was quickly overshadowed by grumblings from disgruntled commuters and frustrated merchants. This time, the city is banking on a different result. For one thing, the event will take place on a Sunday afternoon rather than on Friday during evening commute hours. In addition, staff and officials from the Downtown Business Improvement District are devoting extra effort this time around on outreach to area merchants.

Thomas Fehrenbach, the city’s economic-development manager, said every ground-floor merchant on University Avenue will get at least two, possibly three, visits before the event informing him or her about the closure (which will take place between 3 and 7:30 p.m.). So far, each ground-floor business has received at least one notification, and the reaction has been positive, Fehrenbach told the Weekly. The city is also encouraging merchants to set up extra chairs, tables and merchandise displays. It is even offering tables and chairs to businesses and restaurants who request extra. “We’ve all been hitting the streets and trying to make sure we get the word out,” Fehrenbach said. “We really hope merchants will have a positive experience and see this as an opportunity to get involved.”

BLUEPRINTS ...

Planet Earth may still be recovering from a post-recession

to a new report from the office of City Manager **James Keene**. The swell of activity is good news for a hub that is still viewed by many as Ground Zero for the “Palo Alto Process” — a derisive term that officials hope to phase out soon. The surge has come at a time when Keene and the city’s planning staff are overhauling the Development Center’s operations and working to improve counter service. The city’s Deputy City Manager **Steve Emslie** was recently appointed to direct the reforms and ensure coordination among the various departments involved in this effort. Vacancies are also now getting filled. According to the new report, the city is preparing to hire one permanent building technician and one temporary one “until workload conditions stabilize.” The city also plans to hire a new plan-check engineer in the next two months, according to the report. These reforms are expected to speed up customer service. But it remains to be seen if they succeed in expunging that exasperating phrase from the local vocabulary.

PATS ON THE BACKS ...

Not everyone was cheering when three Peninsula lawmakers unveiled in April their plan for “high-speed rail done right.” The plan, proposed by state Sen. **Joe Simitian**, D-Palo Alto, U.S. Rep. **Anna Eshoo**, D-Palo Alto, and state Assemblyman **Rich Gordon**, D-Menlo Park, calls for the California High-Speed Rail Authority to abandon any plans involving elevated tracks on the Peninsula, a scaling back of the environmental analysis for the project and a blending of high-speed rail and Caltrain on the Peninsula. The rail authority greeted the plan with a mix of suspicion and confusion, and one state lawmaker, Assemblywoman **Cathleen Galgiani**, D-Livingston, branded it the “Great Train Robbery.” In Palo Alto, however, city officials have been tickled pink by the proposal from their elected representatives. Last week, the City Council Rail Committee unanimously endorsed a letter to the state and federal officials fully