

Community Comment 4/28/2014

By Jon Sapper

Fortuna's Good Fortune

You're there when you get to the slide. That was the line folks used when giving directions on how to get to Fortuna.....in 1874. You see, there was a large slide that had to be traversed between the Eel River and the hill on the northwest part of town. So, being creative souls, they named the town Slide. The name was quickly changed to Springville a year later when....probably, real estate people had a tough time selling property in a town named Slide. But, in 1888, Springville was renamed Fortuna when settlers saw the proximity of the forests, the Eel River Valley and the ocean, ideal for quality of life and being quote "fortunate" to live there. By the way, it is believed the name Fortuna was a result of a real estate agent and minister coming up with the name as a marketing gimmick, apparently praying for good fortune.

The town was first known for its excellent agriculture: vegetables, berries and fruit with shipments going to the San Francisco Bay Area. And there was salmon, lots of salmon and there was lots of water, but, that's another Community Comment.

Then in the late 1800's the railroad came in, lumber mills flourished and the economic future of Fortuna was crystalized. And it was good fortune. There were jobs for anyone who wanted to work. Some people made a lot of money and some people made just enough money to buy a home and raise a family. I grew up there in the 60's. It was a Mayberry and Ozzie and Harriet town with a vibrant Mainstreet where everyone gathered.

The game started changing in the 1980's. The stable, never-to-go-away timber industry that was the economic foundation for over a hundred years was shrinking, and rapidly. Losing over 2000 quality jobs in the surrounding community was a kick in the stomach. Regardless of the reasons, an economic shock and paralysis set in and any efforts to mobilize the community to take responsibility for its economic future was slow in developing. I don't think there are many folks left who believe that single log loads rolling down the freeway will be Fortuna's return to economic prosperity. The secure economic safety net that was here for generations is gone.

Fortuna's economic future will be decided by the leadership of its citizens to take responsibility and action to develop a more stable diversified economy, providing family wage jobs, so folks can buy homes and raise families there once again. Other communities have done it, so can Fortuna.

Maybe all the real estate agents and clergy need to come together once again and pray for good fortune.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.