

15 MINUTES

Mall momentum

Like shopping centers across America—and retail in general—Chico Mall has been struggling this past decade to remain relevant. Over the past several years, under the general management of Natasha Shelton, Chico Mall has expanded its offerings from traditional mall stores to include outside-the-box tenants like Chico Honda Motorsports and an online school, Oak Bridge Academy. In 2019, under the new ownership of Sacramento-based commercial real estate firm Ethan Conrad Properties, the mall is at an exciting precipice, Shelton told the CN&R. The plan is to diversify the center's offerings while maintaining its family programming (like free family movie nights) and stores that are already doing well. Shelton, who grew up in Chico and has managed the place since 2016, sat down with the CN&R in her mall office—which, if all goes according to plan, will be demolished to make way for a restaurant with patio access—and offered a look into what's in store for the shopping center.

What big changes are coming to the mall this year?

We hope to keep Forever 21, move them [out of the anchor spot] and then cut that box up into three stores. I can't tell



PHOTO BY ASHIAH SCHARAGA

you who it is, but it's an organic grocery store, a really popular home store and then we're looking at either ... a pet store or an eyeglass store. We are talking to Dave & Buster's, I can say that. And then we're looking at different options, likely demoing the Sears box, totally scrapping it, and then building a bistro-type theater. They would offer food so you can have dinner there and drinks while you're watching your movie. We're also looking at adding stuff to the pads [near Outback]. We're talking to a bagel store, we're talking to a coffee [store], we're talking to Chick-fil-A. We just have so much interest. It's nice.

Moving forward, what's your vision for the mall?

We want to maintain our focus on the community always, through our marketing events and our specialty leasing pro-

gram, to continue to reach out to local businesses and let them know that we definitely have opportunity at the mall to lease space, even if it's just a temporary pop-up situation. Not everyone knows how many local businesses that we actually have and support at the mall. Also, with the [Camp Fire], it's been really awesome to see that we've been able to partner with Paradise. There were people there that lost their homes and their businesses, and we were able to provide them a place here to open up their business at a really subsidized rent. ... We're really trying to expand our customer base. At this point, we have an opportunity to develop a center that builds a deeper place in the community and stimulates economic revitalization for the city of Chico.

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THE GOODS

Help with all that money



by
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I was talking the other day to a friend of mine who works at a local bank. We were catching up after not having seen each other in a while and, naturally, the Camp Fire came up. Neither of us lost our homes, thankfully, but one thing he mentioned caught my attention: He's noticed people coming in to his bank and, rather than depositing their insurance checks, cashing them.

"One guy called in advance to make sure we had \$70,000 in cash at our branch," he said. I was surprised to say the least, but worried as well. Aside from the obvious dangers in carrying around that much money—even if it's just from the door to your car—there's the ease with which cash can be spent frivolously. My friend shared that concern, that many people could well spend their entire insurance settlement and then not have that money left to rebuild.

I reached out to **Emily Rogan**, chief operating officer at **United Policyholders (UP)**, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that formed in the wake of the Oakland Hills Fire in 1991 that destroyed nearly 3,500 homes. Its mission is to help people navigate insurance claims to ensure they're getting what they're entitled to, and also to offer help with financial planning.

"Our guidance starts with recommending people not make big financial decisions in the first few months," Rogan told me. "We recommend opening a different bank account so you know where that insurance money is."

Another piece of advice: "Even if you have insurance, file with FEMA and apply for SBA loans right away, because those things have deadlines. If you get denied, you can appeal down the road." The deadline to apply for both is Jan. 31. According to **Chico Mall** General Manager **Natasha Shelton**, the disaster recovery center in the former Sears space is set to close Feb. 15.

UP held its first workshop for Camp Fire victims last week at Chico State; more are in the works, with a second planned for later this month. For more on the nonprofit, go to uphelp.org.

FOODIE NEWS The fire has dominated much of my brain power lately, but do not fear—I'm still keeping up with other local business happenings. I learned last week that **Southern Zen Barbecue** is back at it and will be taking up residence every Monday and Tuesday at **Secret Trail Brewing Co.** The menu includes gumbo!

RIP Just before Christmas, a sign went up at **Cocina Cortes**, on Dayton Road, announcing its permanent closure. Its Facebook page clarified that the owner, **Rodolfo Cortes Martinez**, had fallen ill. I'm sad to report that he passed on Dec. 29. Every time I went in, he was in the kitchen, working hard to make people happy through food. His obituary says he helped pioneer the sale of chicharrones (pork rinds) in Los Angeles before moving to Chico, where he opened the first taco truck, wowing locals with his famous chimichangas. He will be missed.

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