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BAY AREA

Can a once-sleepy village off Highway 101 become the Bay Area’s next retail mecca?


By Julie Johnson, Staff Writer
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 Gift Article





Montgomery Village, an open-air shopping center in Santa Rosa, is attracting a different type of “premium” retailer. It could help transform the city’s reputation away from being a sleepy cow town.
Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle



Listen Now: Can a once-sleepy village off Highway 101 become the Bay Area’s next retail mecca? Can a once-sleepy

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Just six years ago, cowboys drove a herd of 30 longhorn cattle past banks and breweries in downtown Santa Rosa to herald the start of the county fair. Wine Country's biggest city has been "kind of an overgrown cow town," Mayor Mark Stapp said.

But Santa Rosa is fast changing.

This urban center on Highway 101 just over an hour north of San Francisco is attracting a new type of premium brand. Fashion retailers Anthropologie, Vuori and Warby Parker. Disneyland-famous Salt & Straw ice cream. Southwest Airlines. Publicly-traded Shake Shack. And, perhaps soon, driverless Waymo robotaxi service.

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"There's a dawning awareness that we're the fifth largest city in the Bay Area, and we're starting to live up to that," Stapp said.



Avid Coffee will soon have a new competitor at Montgomery Village, as Blue Bottle Coffee is expected to open in the outdoor shopping center in Santa Rosa.

Among these big names, brick-and-mortar retailers have for the most part avoided downtown or Santa Rosa's two large indoor shopping malls and are instead spurring a revival about a mile-and-a-half east at a once-sleepy neighborhood shopping center with covered wagon mascots and free parking.



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Montgomery Village is a roughly 280,000-square-foot outdoor marketplace where about 60 businesses open to sidewalks connecting low-slung buildings that hark back to the 1950 aesthetic of when it was built.

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Terri Stark, whose Mediterranean restaurant Monti's (a nod to the nickname for students at nearby Montgomery High School) has anchored the village for more than two decades, said it had for years "desperately needed the overhaul." The center would be deserted when they closed at 9 p.m. "to the point where we needed escorts to walk employees to their cars," she said.

"Now it's far nicer than anything else we have for shopping in Santa Rosa," said Stark, who owns seven other restaurants in Santa Rosa and Healdsburg with her husband Mark.



Customers are seen inside Monti's during lunch service at Montgomery Village in Santa Rosa.
Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle

Montgomery Village always had the makings for a vibrant retail mecca: popular local businesses, a grocery store, outdoor spaces and thousands of homes (with potential shoppers) nearby. But the shopping village seemed to have plateaued as a quiet afternoon destination for retirees over the past decade.

Then, in 2021, Boston-based WS Development purchased the site from a local family, and began a slow transformation. The company punched through walls to open up a key walkway and tore down a wood-paneled steak-and-potatoes restaurant, replacing it with a pilates studio and an outpost of Berkeley-based brewery Fieldwork. Boomer-oriented apparel retailers like Talbots and Soft Surroundings are gone, replaced with popular retailers such as Free People and Sephora.

"I'm actually impressed," said Spring Maxfield, founder and director of nonprofit Santa Rosa Urban Arts Partnership, which organizes community events like an art studio tour and winter parade. Maxfield said Santa Rosa has lacked public places where people, especially youths, can gather safely without requirements — just enticements — to spend money.

"I saw groups of teenagers hanging out, old people, people working on their computers," said Maxfield, who hadn't been to the village in years but returned recently to see the changes. "One of the corridors was set up with firepits and chairs."

On a recent weekday afternoon, Monti's was packed for lunch. Families held ice cream cones while playing an oversize chess board. Parents pushing strollers dipped into boutiques. The line was out the door at locally-owned Avid Coffee.



Avid Coffee has been a popular addition to Santa Rosa's Montgomery Village, with lines sometimes out the door.
Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle

Sarah Puckett, who has worked at village salon Montage for 22 years, said she used to drive to Marin County or shop online for good quality clothing, and is encouraged that she might shop closer to home. She marveled at how often her teenage daughter and niece met up with friends at the village now that most of the construction walls have come down and new businesses opened.

"This is a new fresh vibe," said Puckett, who had just finished lunch at the recently opened Sweetgreen fast-casual restaurant with her sister. Montgomery Village's change is part of a greater transformation across the greater Bay Area where cities are pushing for more housing, hotels, restaurants and attractions for waves of tourists and growing populations of people who want more than rustic charm.

Santa Rosa has grown over the past several decades from an insular agricultural community to a city of nearly 200,000 people with three major hospitals.



An aerial view of Montgomery Village, an open-air shopping center in Santa Rosa.
Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle

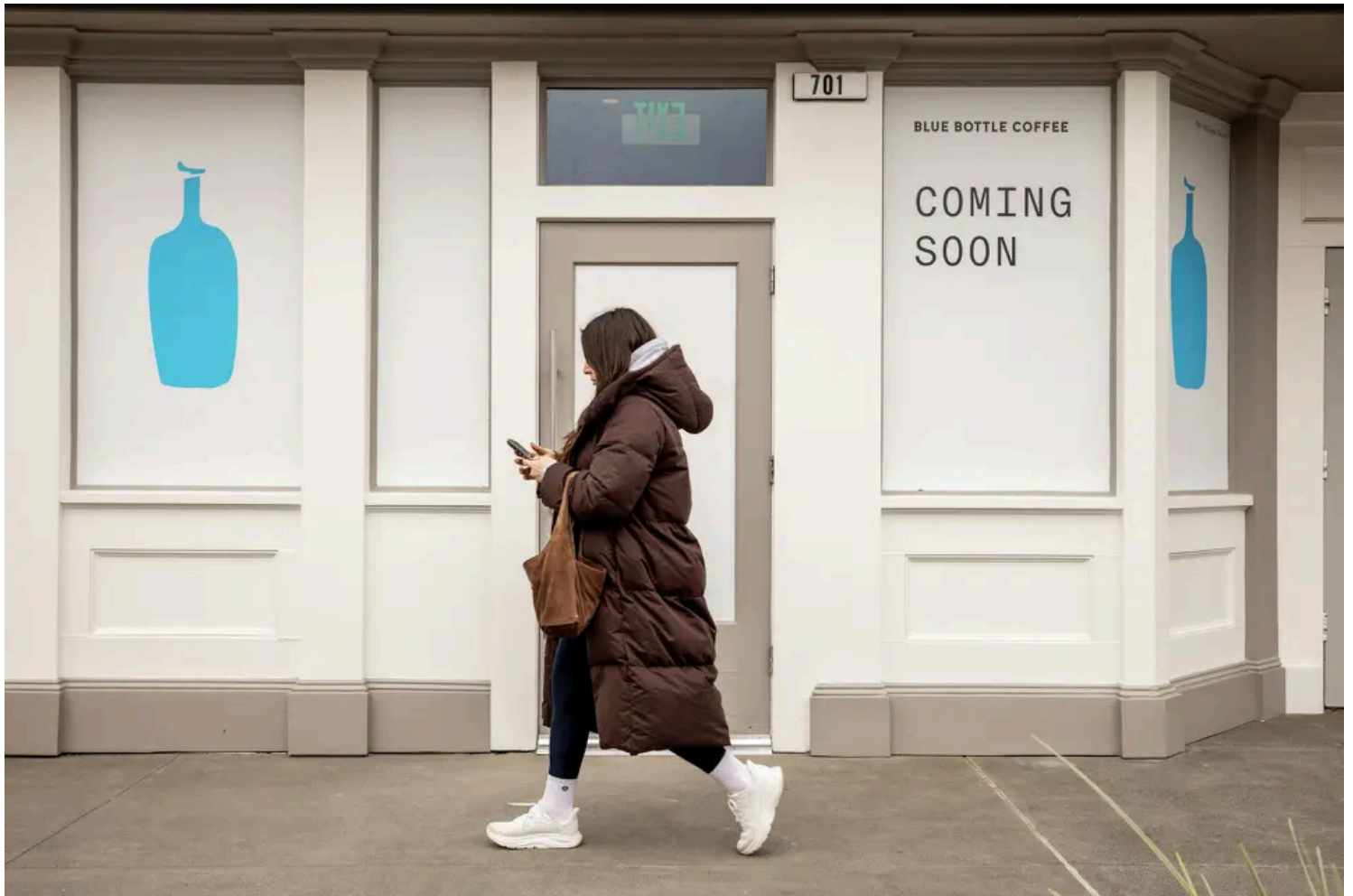
New condos and apartment buildings are rising up where abandoned orchards once sprawled between residential streets, and the city is attracting interest from larger market, luxury developers. The airport recently built a runway long enough for discount juggernaut Southwest Airlines, which announced it would start flights from this mid-city in April 2026 with service to Denver, San Diego, Las Vegas and Burbank.

Driverless robotaxi service Waymo received approval last month from the California Department of Motor Vehicles to expand service beyond the Golden Gate including Sonoma County as far north as Cloverdale. Stapp said he hopes attracting bigger companies to set roots in Sonoma County brings more choices for Santa Rosans — and more big employers.

Even so, the mayor acknowledged that some residents are concerned that big brands could edge out Santa Rosa retailers. But so far, Montgomery Village has kept most, if not all, of its local businesses.

Ananda Sweet, CEO of the Santa Rosa Metro Chamber, said local businesses “are the lifeblood of our community” but they depend on popular, big-name retailers for foot traffic.

“Otherwise, people will take those tax dollars out of our community or do their shopping online,” Sweet said.



A pedestrian walks past an upcoming Blue Bottle Coffee store at Montgomery Village in Santa Rosa.
Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle

At Montgomery Village, the changes brought major, monthslong construction disruptions that, at points, led some business owners including the Starks to consider closing. But now most of the scaffolding is gone, and a brighter, bustling environment has emerged. WS Development added outdoor gathering spaces with seating, astroturf, kid-friendly climbable sculptures and public games, including an oversize chess board and Connect Four.

The developer, in a statement, said the company wanted to build on the village's foundation as a gathering place and “stay true to the Village's character.”

"Businesses are reporting increased interest, visitors are spending more time on the property, and the overall momentum continues to grow," the company said.

The center is still home to core local businesses including Copperfield's Books, Avid Coffee, Wild Honey Mercantile, Punch Clothing, Sonoma Outfitters and Made Local Marketplace.



A sign for Montgomery Village, an open-air shopping center, shows the connection to Santa Rosa's cow town past.
Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle

Additions include fast-casual restaurants Sweetgreen, Mendocino Farms and Shake Shack. A sign on a storefront says a Blue Bottle Coffee will open soon. Crews this past week installed the big Apple logo on a newly white storefront for the electronics retailer.

The company also kept the covered wagons and refurbished an old-timey mechanical horse named "Sandy."

Montgomery Village straddles both sides of thoroughfare Sonoma Avenue, and adding restaurants and retailers adds both interest and potential competition. A Blue Bottle Coffee is soon to open on the opposite end from Avid Coffee. Avid owner Rob Daly said he's hopeful the center is generating enough foot traffic to support two cafes.

"To bring in larger, more established stores, that's a very different move," Daly said. "It'll play out if it's good or bad."

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**Julie Johnson**

REPORTER



Julie Johnson is a staff writer covering wildfires, electricity prices, oil refineries and the North Coast of California for the Chronicle.

Julie's in-depth examination of smoke exposure among wildland firefighters was a Scripps Howard finalist in 2023 for environmental reporting. In 2024, Julie's investigation into the killing of a Mohawk activist who helped spark the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island, written with Jason Fagone, won first place honors from the Online Journalism Awards. Prior to the Chronicle, Julie was a reporter with the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, where she anchored the paper's coverage of California wildfires awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in breaking news.

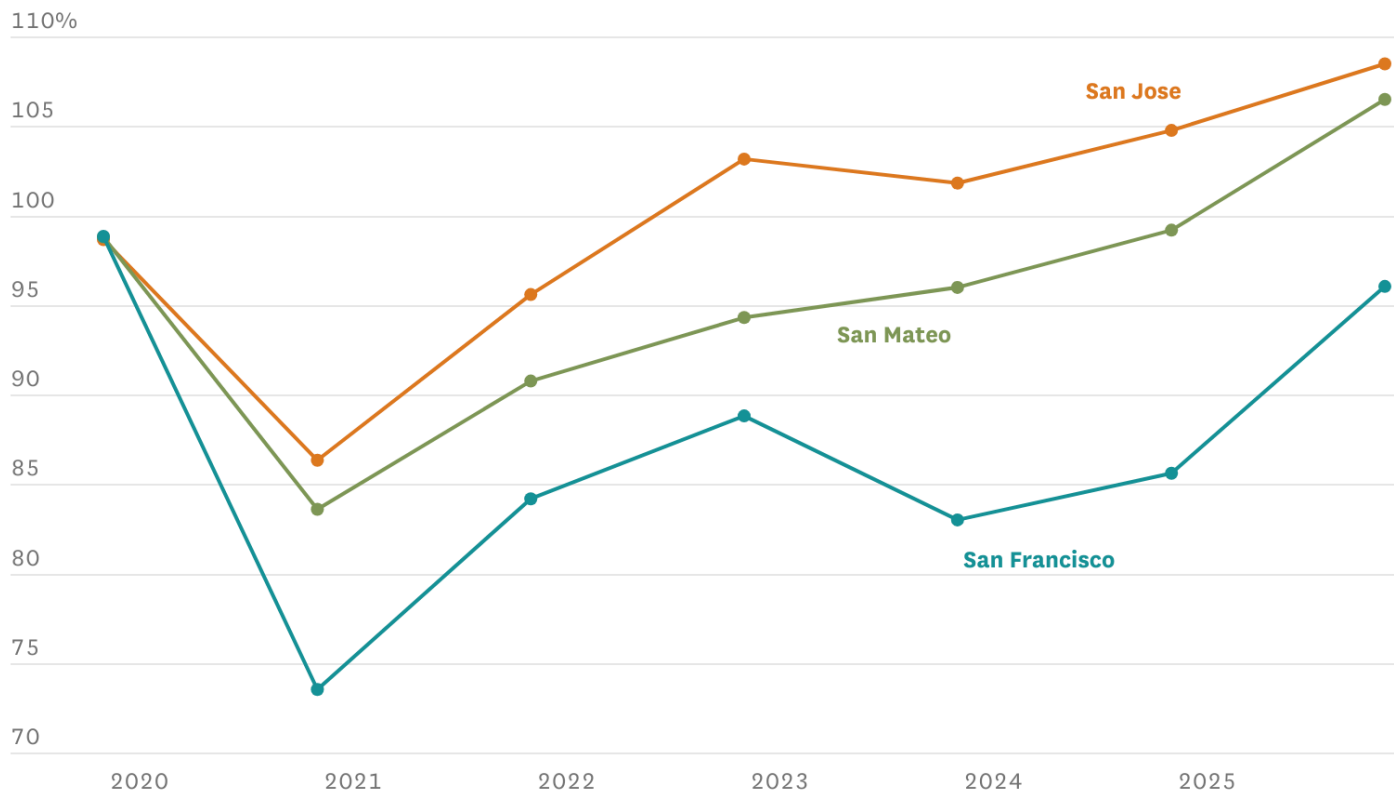
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