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East Sacramento's LITTLE ITALY Historic District celebrated

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East Sacramento's Little Italy Historic District celebrated

By LANCE ARMSTRONG

With its recent city designation as the Little Italy Historic District, a section of East Sacramento was celebrated on Oct. 9 through a recognition event held at the bocce ball courts at East Portal Park.

The designation became official on Sept. 21, when the Sacramento City Council unanimously voted to officially recognize this area as a historic district.

During that meeting, Council Member Jeff Harris, whose council district includes historic Little Italy, highlighted the area, bringing attention to its past and present.

Current Italian businesses in that designated district, which lies within the boundaries of 48th to 59th Street and from J Street to Folsom Boulevard, include: Corti Bros., Talini's Nursery, Culjis & Herberger Funeral Home, Allora Italian seafood restaurant and bar, and Mattone Ristorante.

Beyond the long history of Italian presence in East Sacramento – one that began with its earliest settlers a century ago – Italian history in the capital city dates back even earlier – to the Gold Rush, noted Harris during the Sept. 21 meeting.



Photos by Lance Armstrong
Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg, far right, and Council Member Jeff Harris, standing next to Steinberg, are shown at the event with members of the Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento.

“Italian roots run deep in the history of Sacramento, right from the Gold Rush days forward,” he said.

Sacramento's earliest Italians congregated along the waterfront in the area of present-day Old Sacramento, in the 1850s through 1870s.

By the following decade, Italians began to concentrate in other areas, including Oak

Park, Southside and downtown. They also established homes in East Sacramento and Land Park.

At the center of much of the Italians' activities was the Italian Catholic church – Chiesa di Santa Maria (St. Mary's Church) – which dedicated its first structure on N Street, between 8th and 9th streets, in 1907, and was re-

located to 7th and T streets in 1914.

Following major fundraising by its members, a new St. Mary's Church was constructed at 58th and M streets in East Sacramento and was dedicated with about 900 people in attendance on Aug. 1, 1948.

The church's relocation to East Sacramento increased

Italian presence in the area, and many Italians still reside in that area today.

Bill Cerruti, executive director of the Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento, told the East Sacramento News that several hundred families on the society mailing list live in East Sacramento.

“That gives you some indication that there are a lot of Italians still there (in East Sacramento),” he said.

Cerruti, who grew up on 48th Street in Little Italy and graduated from Sacramento High School in 1959, said that efforts to establish a City Council-adopted Little Italy Historic District date back to 2018.

In addition to Cerruti, another active advocate for bringing this special designation to East Sacramento's historic Little Italy district was Fabrizio Sasso, a resident of East Sacramento and the executive director of the Sacramento Central Labor Council.

Harris acknowledged Cerruti and Sasso as the people who “brought this (Little Italy Historic District) idea to me.”

Cerruti told this paper that the inspiration for pursuing this city designation came from some of the newer Italian residents of East Sacramento.

“What happened was (in 2018), not only did some residents in the area approach me and say, ‘We're fairly new to the area, but it's so Italian.’ And they were Italian Americans, so they said we should do something to recognize the area.

“At the same time, at the Italian Center (in Carmichael), we have children's classes – preschool and elementary school classes, plus a children's dance troupe. So, we get a lot of the young, Ital-

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ian American families with kids in our program.

"In talking to the mothers that live in (East Sacramento) or have lived here, they were saying they just didn't feel empowered like they should be for their families, and they were starting to move out of the area more and more. So, that motivated me to get something going, to make the people in this area finally be recognized and feel like they were accepted and belong here."

Cerruti noted that he next recruited two East Sacramento residents with "some influence" with the City Council.

"I put them on my team and we approached Councilman Harris (and then) I met him for coffee at a local coffee shop (for) just a brief start," he said. "(Harris) said, 'Yeah, that's a good idea.'"

Cerruti added that the COVID-19 pandemic created delays with this project until earlier this year.

With the Little Italy designation finally approved by the City Council, about 50 people participated in the invitation-only event at East Portal Park on Oct. 9.

The gathering included a presentation of a Little Italy resolution from the city, speeches, traditional Italian dancing, Italian food, cake and mingling among friends, followed by games of bocce.

Included in the resolution are the words: "Generations of Italians have grown up and lived in the historic Little Italy, and longtime residents and businesses play an integral role in the cultural and economic landscape of the area. The story of East Sacramento's Little Italy neighborhood and the Italian people that made that story should be preserved."

Mayor Darrell Steinberg told this paper that recognizing

Little Italy was a "beautiful moment for our city."

"The Italian American community has been and continues to be such a big part of Sacramento, and to recognize history is vital," he said. "And, you know, we need more reasons to celebrate, and this is a great celebration."

"It's a great moment. Congratulations to Bill (Cerruti) and the Italian American community that made this happen. This will last for generations."

As part of this designation, signs will be posted by the city in various places in this area to recognize the historic Little Italy district.

Bill Cerruti's wife, Patricia Cinquini Cerruti, who immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1982, also shared her thoughts on the designation.

"I think it is just so amazing," she said. "When I first arrived in Sacramento, I noticed there were so many old Italians from my region, Lucca, and so many of them are gone now. And I think it's so important to understand what they've done and how much they gave to this community. So, to me, it's wonderful."

Luigi Alfredo "Lou" Talini, the owner of Talini's Nursery, also celebrated the Little Italy designation at the event.

"I think that's quite an accomplishment because it will preserve part of the past history," he said. "I think it should have been done a long time ago."

Talini told this paper that he was fortunate to grow up in the area and witness earlier years of Little Italy.

"When I was growing up, my father and all the older Italians that were in the neighborhood (were) getting together all the time and everybody knew everybody; doors were unlocked," he said. "They would come down to (East Portal Park). I remember this park before the (current) bocce ball (courts were) in. There were Italians all over."

Ottavio Luchini, 96, recalled earlier times in the area.



Irene Brown and her daughter, Sami, of the Balliamo! Italian cultural dance group show off their festive Italian outfits at the event.

"I remember when you walked around (Little Italy) they (spoke) Italian, 50% (of the people or more)," he said.

Luchini, a member of Sacramento's Dante Club for about the past 70 years, added that he and Luigi's father, Pietro Talini, became partners in the nursery business at 5025 J St. in East Sacramento in the early 1950s.

Irene Brown, director/choreographer of the Balliamo! Italian cultural dance group, entertainers at the event, mentioned why she appreciates Little Italy's official designation.

"My family has lived in East Sacramento for many years," she said. "You know, we've all been here forever, so it's about time we get some recognition."

Brown added that her great-grandfather, Ernesto Guido Galli, was one of the organizing members of the Giacomo Puccini Lodge No. 1352, Order Sons of Italy in America, and the Dante Club in Sacramento during the 1920s.

Another one of her relatives, her maternal grandfather, Vittorio "Victor" Galli, was born in Sacramento in

1911, and served as president of the Dante Club in 1971.

While standing next to her mother in her festive dancing attire, Brown's daughter, Sami, noted that the Little Italy designation serves

as a significant tool to further Italian culture in East Sacramento.

"It's just really cool to see, especially this whole area, just become a part of that culture," she said.

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