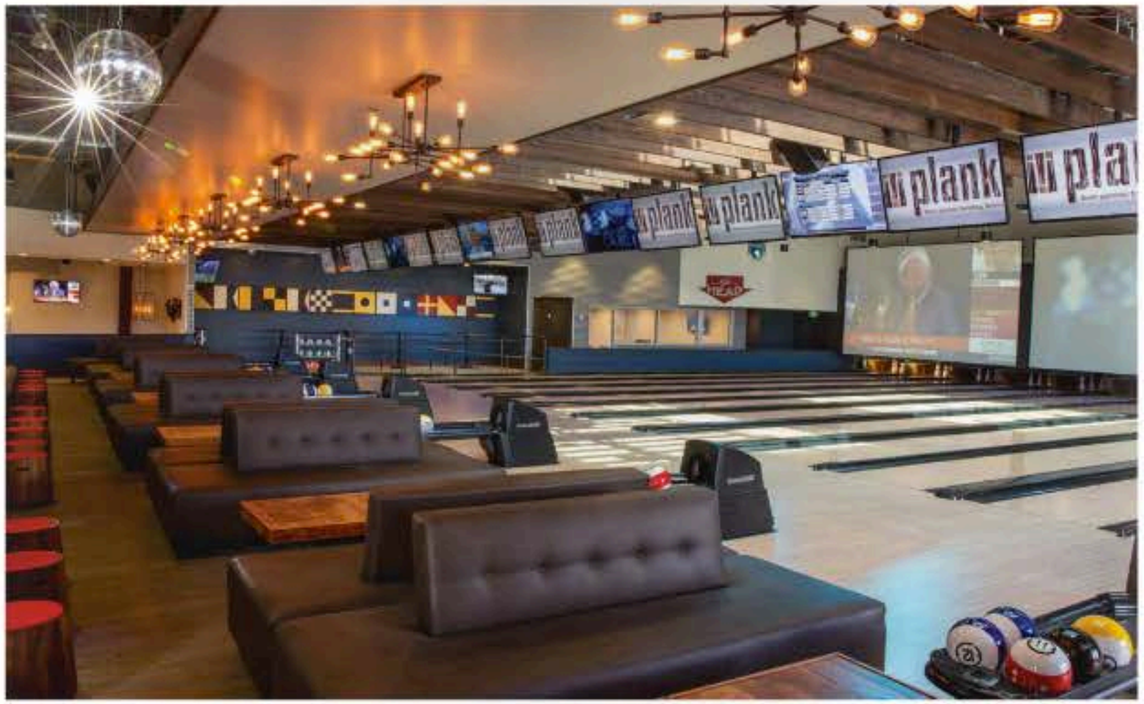
FEATURE



Sustainable Fun at Plank

At Oakland's only FEC, the mood is decidedly upscale urban, with a focus on environmental sustainability.

By Sean Krainert

When Trifecta Management Group (TMG) teamed up with developer Ellis Partner in Oakland, California in 2013, a lasting and meaningful relationship began that would change a community.

Oakland is home to over 400,000 people and a thriving community known for its political activism, sports franchises, tech companies, foodie and craft beer culture and sustainability practices that are a nation-wide model. A mecca for modern and sustainable living and a magnet for the tech-advanced culture, Oakland is one of the most diverse major cities in the country.

What attracted TMG to Oakland was an equal combination of location and community, both possessing unparalleled character and history. When Plank put down roots in the Port of Oakland at Jack London Square, they took an oath to become a part of Oakland rather than simply being a business within its borders. But it wasn't without taking the obligatory steps that they became a part of the community.

For TMG, the stars aligned when they were first introduced to the space at Jack London Square, the future home of FEC Plank. The abandoned Barnes and Noble building left behind an industrial shell of unfinished woods, exposed bolts and a raw and organic feel innate to the historical Oakland character. In an effort to maintain and enhance the inherent charm, developers salvaged materials to reuse in the creation of Plank, from outside pavers, to windows and doors, all within the original architecture.

But the building was only half of the journey in creating an FEC that was tailored to the community. In order to find out exactly who Oakland was, TMG began a boots-on-the-ground research initiative across the city, personally meeting with the residents and businesses that made up it's core.

TMG's mission as a company to create, deliver and manage compelling, customized restaurant and entertainment concepts tailored to the specific needs of the marketplace, was dead-center in-line with the creation of Plank. The founding team and current managing partners Ron Lam, Bruce Nussbaum and Michael Auger, comprised the executive management team and strategic operational and development nucleus at GameWorks, the acclaimed restaurant and interactive entertainment concept founded by Steven Spielberg, Universal Studios and Sega. Together with the combined experience, the team was able to quickly recognize the unique opportunity put before them.

Jack London Square is, and always has been, the heart of Oakland's port operations, a vibrant waterfront with a thriving wholesale produce market. As one of the oldest neighborhoods in Oakland, the mainstay restaurants and storefronts have been under the care of long-time residents for decades. As part of their meticulous research, TMG met with business owners from Jack London Square all the way out into downtown Oakland. The goal was not solely to come in as a fierce business competitor, but to compliment the businesses that were already a part of the community.

Meeting the residents of Oakland is what fueled TMG's passion and motivation in crafting Plank. The team walked into restaurants, bars and businesses, reaching out with daily conversations to find out who Oakland really was. Consistent findings across the board were that Oakland clearly lacked entertainment options catering to the active adult, businesses and families. What the community needed was a one-stop entertainment facility tailor-made for Oaklanders.

The third component in creating an exclusive FEC for Oakland was to involve the local community in the daily functions of Plank. Hiring locally was an effort that TMG took on in order to maintain a seamless experience for Oaklanders. By taking this above-and-beyond step to hire locally, something that is often overlooked in bigger cities, the Oakland community quickly became invested in the success of Plank. Current Plank general manager Pat Shroll continues the mission with

outreach to the community in order to fill positions within the business.

Because bowling was identified early on as one of the main entertainment components, TMG teamed up with Brunswick Bowling. Vice president of new center development John Roush jumped on board and was an added inspiration to the enthusiasm behind the project. "It is important that center owners know their customers and deliver an experience suitable to their expectations," says Roush.

It was just this concept that TMG was trying to accomplish with Plank. Knowing the customers, and crafting an experience that would meet the distinct expectations of a diverse, tight-knit community was the goal. So, with the creativity bubbling, and the location ready for rejuvenation, Plank took form. On October 10, 2014, Plank opened up to the public with four major components: beer garden, arcade, bowling and food - an unprecedented combination FEC for the city of Oakland.

The layout of Plank was a focal point in development and is a proud feature of the facility, beginning with the initial interaction a guest has with Plank in the central beer garden. The open, 15,000-square-feet of outdoor space is home to three bocce ball courts, lounging chairs with tables, fire pits and 48 beers on tap behind the longest bar in Oakland.

Auger shared Trifecta's motive behind the layout. "How many bowling centers can you say you look out and see the water? Oakland has 300 days of sunshine a year, so in order to take advantage of the location, we had to create a beer garden concept. This fit well with this location, but also, was a great tie into what the Oakland community was looking for. To recognize the craft beer movement and have an outside lounging and socialization area were two elements we had to have. We pride ourselves in having all of the local brewers here in Oakland on our taps." TMG found in their research that having local beers on tap was a green flag for being a locally-minded business and a huge lure for their local clientele.

The design plan for Plank is something that Auger noted as being one of the things Plank was most proud of. He explains, "When you walk into the facility, we want people to know what we are, and not have to guess. From the outside, you immediately see the beer garden with fire pits and bocce ball. Then when you enter Plank, you can clearly see the arcade, bowling lanes, restaurant and bar without wondering."

The arcade component of Plank takes up a large portion of the 4,000-square-foot interior space. The idea behind the games was a reflection of how TMG tuned-in to the kid in everybody, in particular, the competitive spirit. Auger said, "Video games and games in general allow everyone to relive their youth, hit the home run, win the race, things that as an adult you don't have the opportunity to do." ❖

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