

## Sprucing Up Main Street

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The latest effort in a decades-old tradition of trying to resurrect deteriorating downtown Watsonville is slowly and quietly coming together in a series of meetings that have engaged the interest and the hope of the downtown business community. Past efforts to revitalize the struggling downtown have emanated mainly from professionals at Watsonville City Hall whose addiction to the powers of eminent domain and the creative destructiveness of the bulldozer have deeply alienated the neighborhood they sought to improve. This time around, however, the downtown business community itself is at the heart of the effort and the most serious question the skeptics can raise is whether past improvement efforts have done enough damage to make revitalization a hopeless cause.

The numbers on the decline of the downtown are startling: In just 13 years Watsonville's share of taxable sales throughout the county has plummeted from 30.6 percent to just 13.4 percent. The main cause of this decline is the willingness of the City of Capitola to set up the retail equivalent of a red-light district on 4 1st Avenue — safely removed from the homes of city councilmembers — to increase Capitola's haul over those 13 years from 1 percent of the county's sales to a robust 43.5 percent.

Downtown Watsonville has suffered even more than the city as a whole because numerous controversial retail developments at the north end of town were approved in the 1980s in the hope of competing with Capitola. The cluster of shopping centers near Main Street and Green Valley Road have failed miserably in their competition with 4 1st Avenue — as the taxable sales numbers demonstrate — but have devastated stores in Watsonville's old downtown.

"The downtown is going to hell and we have to do something about it," said councilmember Tony Campos, who has been a leading figure on the Hispanic Affairs Committee of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce & Agriculture. Campos convened the discussions among downtown businesspeople this summer and serves as

the group's main liaison to the city council.

The group's vision of a revived downtown Watsonville is strikingly similar to Santa Cruz's Pacific Garden Mall without the boutiques, frozen yogurt shops and overpriced food. Automobile traffic would be diverted off the southern portion of Main Street, which now serves as an extension of State Highway 152. With the traffic greatly reduced there would be room to implement diagonal parking on Main Street and to spruce the old place up with flowers and trees.

Public events like the Farmers' Market begun last year — the streets are closed down weekly to make room for the produce — would be encouraged to bring the people back to their downtown. The group of around 20 downtown businesspeople suggesting these improvements includes both the representatives of large stores like J.C. Penney's and Ford's and local people who have had property taken by the city like Stella Romo of the Jalisco Restaurant.

The question that haunts this unusual attempt at civic improvement is whether previous ill-fated redevelopment efforts have exhausted the reservoir of money, land and goodwill needed to bring life back to the downtown.

Directly across Main Street from Watsonville City Hall is a three-acre weed-infested vacant lot owned by the U.S. Postal Service. The postal service has claimed title to this collection of weeds for a year-and-a-half now and their latest guess is that they might begin construction of a new post office next year.

That land was not long ago home to nearly a score of local businesses, many of them thriving enough to be considering improvements. The Daylite Market, begun in the depression by a group of Chinese families, was looking for room to expand. Anthony Giammanco was ready to invest in a new walk-in refrigerator when the city forcibly purchased and demolished his fish market. And they were far from being the only businesses ready to improve when the city erect-

ed a vacant lot as a monument to redevelopment.

On the remaining two acres of the block across Main from city hall are another dozen businesses that stand to go the way of the bulldozer in the near future. The city has forcibly bought the land and sold it to San Jose builder Barry Swenson, who plans to develop a new retail center.

Before the bulldozers came in, a citizens redevelopment committee suggested a plan for the downtown striking in its similarity to the proposals coming now from the business community. Start with a beautification project, the city said, by getting the traffic off Main Street and creating a pedestrian mall atmosphere. The city responded then by ignoring the suggestions and disbanding the committee.

Now that the vision of the downtown has come full circle there are considerably fewer resources to put behind the revival. Many of the displaced local businesspeople who were ready to improve their stores and improve on decades of service to their neighbors are out of business or out of the downtown. And the substantial bankroll of redevelopment funds the city had just a few years ago has been exhausted by the ill-fated game of Main Street demolition derby.

The current approach is, by necessity, to think small and go slow. The city council has expressed interest in rerouting Highway 152 off Main Street and installing diagonal parking and planters, but only on the two-block stretch from Lake to Beach Street.

"Our thinking is to go in on a small scale — do something slow and something positive," Campos said. "Eventually we'd like to go from the Pajaro Bridge to St. Patrick's Church [about a mile away]."

But the ironic legacy left by the demolition approach to revitalizing downtown Watsonville could result in the first step of beautification being a traffic-free street with diagonal parking and lovely plantings for the locals to enjoy as they stroll past the vacant lot across the street from city hall.