

Watsonville council OKs downtown blueprint

By **KAREN CLARK**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — A blueprint for redeveloping downtown into a pedestrian-friendly shopping and cultural Mecca was approved by the City Council Tuesday night.

"I've seen it happen in other towns, but to see it happening in our town is really great," said Vice Mayor Oscar Rios. "It's important we don't go piecemeal, that we have a plan."

That plan details a downtown with landscaped pedestrian alleys, fresh

facades on old buildings, detailed design guidelines for new structures, and a revitalized business district that promises a wider mix of retail shops.

There also will be small plazas at key points around town, fresh landscaping and more murals.

Like many communities, Watsonville hopes to redevelop its downtown with an emphasis on ground-floor retail businesses with office and/or residential space above.

The council already has approved

a new sign program that develops a unifying flavor to the downtown area. In the future, there may be signs at the entrances to downtown, as well as better directional signs to help people find local cultural and historic sites.

The land-use and architectural design guidelines approved by the council already had the backing of both Main Street Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Officials anticipate that having a detailed blueprint will entice devel-

opers and business owners to Watsonville by building confidence there will be a good mix of retail businesses along with an attractive location. Those two things, officials believe, are what's needed to bring people and their shopping dollars downtown.

"We want to avoid the approach that everybody can come here and build whatever they want," Rios said.

A key to the plan is the added burden that will face discount or second-hand shops looking to locate

downtown.

Officials believe there already are enough of those kinds of businesses, and property owners planning on leasing space to additional ones will have to get special approval from the City Council.

Existing discount and second-hand stores won't be kicked out, officials emphasized. But if they move out, the city will take a hard look at whether a different kind of retail shop would better provide that eclectic mix Watsonville envisions for its downtown business district.

The city also hopes to continue re-making downtown into a community gathering spot for special events and cultural activities.

Officials particularly are interested in tying the nearby Henry Mello Performing Arts Center at the high school on Beach Street to downtown, possibly by installing historic street lights from one location to the other.

But downtown won't change overnight, cautioned city officials, who predicted a five- to 10-year revitalization process.