

Cabrillo mulls old post office in Watsonville

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APTOS — Leasing the old Watsonville post office is the "number one option" for Cabrillo College to relocate its growing South County program until it can build a satellite campus, according to school officials.

City and college officials got the go-ahead this week to talk about leasing the two-story building at Union and Trafton streets as a new site for Cabrillo's Watsonville Center.

The center has been based at the La Manzana shopping center since 1987, but has long outgrown its three classrooms and computer lab. Last year, about 900 students were enrolled in the program, most of them part time.

The La Manzana lease, which has cost the college between \$40,000 and \$50,000 a year, ends in July. Cabrillo President John Hurd said the college needs to find an alternative site "yesterday."

"Our first choice is to stay in the downtown area," Hurd said. "... We need to move pretty rapidly."

Cabrillo has made a concerted effort in the last year to follow its master plan to build a satellite campus in Watsonville that could handle roughly 2,000 to 3,000 students.

To qualify for state construction money, however, the center has to have an enrollment of between 1,200 and 1,500 students.

Leasing a larger facility for the next three years would allow the college to boost its enrollment and get in line for state funds.

Hurd said the post office site has "some real attractive advantages" for a college program: It is next to the public library and the plaza, and near the refurbished Fox theater and new public parking.

"It lends itself to a college-type atmosphere," Hurd said.

If the center were to expand there, director Rachel Mayo said it could offer South County students more day classes, more advanced courses, and possibly even house one of the main campus programs.

"We want to stay downtown, identify with the town and the area," said Mayo.

The city of Watsonville bought the 11,000-square-foot post office a

year ago for \$425,000 and has been hunting for a tenant that would help revitalize the downtown area, said City Manager Steve Salomon.

"I think the (city) council feels like it would be real positive" to lease to Cabrillo, Salomon said. He said the two have yet to discuss any terms or costs of the lease.

School officials said the decision of where to move would depend on what the college could afford, with more belt-tightening likely under next year's state budget.

"Some people might think with the money crunch, 'Why are you expanding?' But we have to, to get the (state) funding. It's one of those 'You have to spend money to get money' type of deals," said Mayo.

Ironically, Cabrillo is likely to get state funding for other major improvement projects next year, including \$2.2 million for expanding its library and \$320,000 for a new photography lab.

"These ironies always arise," said Hurd. "... When the operating budget is darkest, we're moving ahead on the highest-priority capital projects."

Cabrillo hopes to get enough state funding to start building a permanent South County campus by the year 2000.

Some of the possible locations include property south of Watsonville City Hall, land next to the new post office, or the old post office itself, if adjacent property could be acquired, Hurd said.

The city agreed in June to commit \$2 million in redevelopment funds if the campus can be built downtown.