

WATSONVILLE - GROWTH Housing 6-14-90 killed in ^{MER} ^{NEWS} downtown retail plan

By Bob Johnson
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The Watsonville City Council has abandoned plans to include as many as 132 single-room apartments on the upper stories of a retail project planned by San Jose builder Barry Swenson on a two-acre redevelopment parcel across Main Street from city hall.

The council decided on a 5-2 vote Tuesday evening to ask Swenson to instead include a modest amount of second-story office space over his 28,000-square-foot shopping center at the corner of Second and Main streets.

The council had asked Swenson early this year to return to the drawing board with his retail project and include apartments to replace some of the hundreds of downtown homes that were lost in the Loma Prieta earthquake.

‘We’re going with the plans we had drawn up before.’

— *Lisa Bullen,*
project manager

But acting city manager Chuck Comstock recommended that offices, not housing, should be stressed on the upper stories above downtown stores to maximize the financial benefit.

And city planning director Maureen Owens also supported separating housing from new commercial developments to avoid parking and traffic problems. “The 200-block and 300-block of Main Street are not the best place to attempt to solve that housing crisis,” Owens told the council in a memo that accompanied Comstock’s recommendation. “In the long run, such an effort may prove costly and ineffective.”

Council members Parr Eves, Lowell Hurst and Oscar Rios were outvoted 4-3 when they suggested that Swenson be asked to scale down his four-story building to just two stories with 44 small apartments.

“They wanted to put up three stories of single-room occupancy with 44 units on each floor (but) that would have been a problem with parking and traffic,” Eves said in explaining his reasons for supporting a smaller project.

After failing to gain a smaller number of apartments, Rios and Hurst voted against the retail center but it was approved by council members Eves, Betty Murphy, Paul Milladin and John Kacsmayrk and Mayor Todd McFarren.

Tuesday’s decision apparently ends months of flip-flops by the council on Swenson’s redevelopment project and is likely to lead to construction in the near future.

“Hopefully we can get the working drawings done in a month. We’re going with the plans we had drawn up before,” said Lisa Bullen, Swenson’s Watsonville project manager. When the final drawings are approved by the city, construction of the shopping center can be completed in six to eight months, according to Bullen.

Swenson told the city council last month that he was amenable to building a shopping center with offices or a center with upper-story apartments, or even a new county courthouse for the Watsonville area county government offices now located on Freedom Boulevard.