

Watsonville Canning auctioned off

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SANTA CRUZ — Norcal Frozen Foods officially bought the former Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. Thursday in a quiet auction held on the steps of the Santa Cruz County Courthouse.

More media were present than bidders as Norcal attorney Peter Radin, of San Francisco, entered two bids to purchase the frozen-food plant for \$7,244,500.37.

Headed by King City grower David Gil, Norcal is the successor company to Watsonville Canning, once the largest frozen-food processor in the country. The company was struck for 18 months by Teamsters in the county's longest labor strike.

In March, Wells Fargo Bank

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began foreclosure proceedings against Watsonville Canning and properties owned by former Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console and his mother, Kathryn Console.

Norcal bought the company in March, but not the property at Ford and Walker streets where the plant is located. Soon after the change in ownership, a settlement was reached with the union's rank and file, ending the strike.

On Thursday, Diane Black of American Security Co. of Campbell, trustee of the property, opened the auction by reading off a list of six parcels which won't be sold until Aug. 6. Among those properties was 35.5 acres on Main Street, and small parcels on Amesti and Harkins Slough roads.

Several prospective bidders were disappointed to hear those properties wouldn't be sold, and one man stormed away.

As Black read off the next auction item for properties at Walker and Ford streets, she announced the opening price would be \$7.2 million, and said, "Please step forward to qualify your funds."

Radin showed a piece of paper and entered a bid of \$7,206,999.37, which was accepted. Not included in the sale were equipment and removable fixtures at the plant.

The next parcel sold was a property on West Ford Street, which Black opened at \$37,500. Radin entered a bid \$1 over that amount that Black accepted.

Neither Gil nor his chief man-

agement people at Norcal were present at the auction.

Since the strike ended, Norcal has been on an upswing, according to company officials. Richard Maltzman, Gil's San Francisco attorney, described morale as "high" and said business has been good.

Larry Vawter, personnel manager at Norcal, said the usual summer slow-down has hit for the cool-weather cole crops. "We're running one shift of broccoli, and cauliflower off and on," he said.

At the height of packing season this past spring, Norcal hired 700 people, which was about two-thirds the number Watsonville Canning normally had on hand that time of year. Vawter said that was in line with what the new management had predicted.