

# The seventies see Watsonville shed small-town image

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

The 1970s in Watsonville were years of unprecedented growth and creeping change.

In 10 years, the city's population jumped from 14,600 to 22,000, more than Watsonville had grown in the 55 years preceding 1970. The population of the greater Watsonville area climbed during the seventies from about 24,000 to 35,000.

Accompanying the booming growth was a significant change in the ethnic composition of the city and Pajaro Valley. While Mexican-Americans in 1970 represented a sizeable minority, by the end of the decade they were approaching a majority in the city, as more and more farm and cannery workers settled in Watsonville permanently rather than just migrating here for the harvest season.

The changes brought problems Watsonville had not experienced to any great extent before. They ranged from traffic congestion, to crime on the streets, to increased racial tension, to a feeling by many old-time residents that their small town had become unmanageable.

Whereas once Watsonville was a closely-knit community, a flock of newcomers, many of them from the Santa Clara Valley or other parts of California, made the town more "impersonal," many residents lamented.

At the same time, however, the city saw new signs of life. Once considered a sleepy, agricultural, "valley-type" town on the coast, Watsonville in many ways woke up as it began to cope with the urban problems confronting much of the nation. Citizens sought ways to put a new face on the pockmarked downtown, and tried to meet the problems of crime and racism head-on. And in dealing with the problems and changes, many residents started to realize that Watsonville's ethnic diversity and historical and architectural heritage were assets worth capitalizing on.

A citizens' committee studying downtown revitalization spent four years meeting weekly over brown-bag lunches, reaching conclusions so professional that out-of-town "professionals" later

indicated that they had little to add to the citizens' report.

When the problem of crime reached intolerable proportions, another citizens' group vigorously discussed the issue every Monday night for several months, with the debate culminating in a well-attended town meeting. Although the recommendations did little to attack the crime problem, for the first time representatives of the increasingly distinct Mexican-American and Anglo communities sat down together to deal frankly with the tensions between them. What the citizens' committee discovered most, concluded UC-Santa Cruz professor Ralph Guzman, was "an urgent need for dialogue."

While cynics sneered at the repeated delays in constructing a "new" downtown, city officials — with pressure from citizens and downtown businessmen and property owners — quietly moved forward, albeit at a turtle's clip. At the beginning of the decade, the council designated itself the downtown Redevelopment Agency, and formed a redevelopment district that sets aside property tax "increments" to help fund construction of redevelopment projects. Within the past few years, the city has paid for numerous studies designed to attract private investment to the central business district, as well as formulate a master plan for the area. All of the studies were optimistic, indicating that the downtown's sickness was curable.

Although Prop. 13 put a damper on the city's tax increment financing, the initiative did not do away with the redevelopment kitty. Currently, about \$160,000 is pouring into redevelopment coffers, and that amount will substantially increase as the redevelopment project moves ahead. In addition, the city has officially been designated a "depressed area" by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, making Watsonville eligible for a new grant program aimed at rejuvenating small cities.

In short, Prop. 13 did not kill the chances for redevelopment. It simply meant city fathers will have to be more creative with the available funds.

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The seventies in Watsonville saw a heightened interest in historic rehabilitation, an idea that dovetailed with the city's desire to redevelop the downtown. The issue came to a head in 1978 when realtor Marty Sglav announced his intention to submit the 109-year-old Mansion House on Main Street to the wrecker's ball. Led by its president, Pat Pirtle, the Pajaro Valley Historical Assn. moved in to save the old hotel. And within a couple of months, Roger Hoffman, who had chaired the citizens' committee for downtown revitalization, announced plans to renovate the structure for a dinner house and professional offices. The project, scheduled to be completed in the spring, is expected to be a catalyst for revitalization, much in the same way that the Cooper House sparked redevelopment of Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz.

While in Santa Cruz County the political scene underwent continual fluctuations, the philosophy of the Watsonville City Council generally remained conservative and "property rights" oriented. Bill Johnston, owner of a real estate, insurance and accounting business on Freedom Boulevard, remained at the mayoral helm from 1971 to the present. (He replaced Bill Murphy, who stepped down after a four-year term.)

It was not until May of 1979 that the political complexion of the council changed. Three new council members won seats, ousting two incumbents (the third decided not to seek re-election). The new members questioned the longstanding pro-growth, pro-annexation policies of the old council. As a whole, the election resulted in a council mandate to provide sensible, "quality" growth.

But throughout most of the decade, the council took an expansionist stance, with Mayor Bill Johnston saying flatly that he thought the whole Pajaro Valley should be "one big city." About 350 acres of orchards on the east side were gobbled up for two large retirement subdivisions, Bay Village and Pajaro Village. Construction of the housing tracts brought a couple of thousand retired people, most of them from outside the area, to Watsonville.

The other major annexation was on the west side of town, where more than 400 acres were incorporated and targeted for residential and industrial development.

The city's desire to annex Freedom went unsatisfied, however. Citizens in the proposed annexation area launched a massive petition drive in December 1978, and in three weeks, gathered protest signatures from three quarters of the 1,300 or so registered voters, triggering an early death to the annexation bid.

City officials maintained that with the advent of Prop. 13, the residents would

actually save money through lowered water and sewer rates, in addition to getting better police and fire protection. But the residents chose to maintain their community's identity instead.

One of the underlying reasons for the defeat was the bitter feeling aroused by the city's "strip annexation" of Freedom Boulevard from Green Valley Road to Atkinson Lane a few years earlier. City officials maintained that everything was on the up-and-up, but a vocal group from Freedom claimed city fathers had acted underhandedly.

If the city of Watsonville handed out a "comeback" of the decade award, the honor would probably go to Frank Osmer, who was elected to the City Council in 1977 following an uncharacteristic, low-key campaign. Osmer had virtually disappeared from public life in the late fifties after he resigned as Watsonville police chief following an insurance-fraud scandal involving "stolen" liquor.

Once he took his seat on the council dais, Osmer quickly became one of the most colorful, controversial, city officials in recent history. It was a rare meeting when he didn't criticize somebody for something. One of his favorite targets was Police Chief Al Williams, who was hired in 1976 following the resignation the year before of James Cunningham. Williams was lambasted for everything ranging from his "inability" to control crime on lower Main to "not getting his facts straight" on reports to the city manager. Osmer made no secret of his feeling that the police Chief's job should've gone to Deputy Police Chief Roy Ingersoll, who had temporarily filled the chief's shoes after Cunningham left.

While Osmer was always quick to criticize, he also displayed a trigger-like wit. His sense of humor kept council meetings lively and, in many ways, "the best show in town."

Watsonville had four city managers in the seventies. The popular, homegrown Tommy Rowan retired in December 1971 after 25 years at City Hall, the last six spent in the top administrative spot. He died following a heart attack in October 1972, with Mayor Johnston eulogizing him as Watsonville's "number one citizen."

Dave Sollenberger replaced Rowan as manager, and, after a kow-key tenure, left in October 1974 to take a higher-paying job in Minnesota. He was replaced a few months later by Ron Bartels, who lasted until October 1977, when he was fired by the council on a 4-3 vote for not being "responsible" enough to council directives. Some City Hall observers contend he was fired for making the "fatal mistake" of hiring Al Williams over Roy Ingersoll. (Bartels subsequently left the Pajaro Valley to take a job planning a new city in Saudi Arabia.)

After the Bartels firing, Finance Director John Radin let it be known that he wanted the city manager's slot. And Councilman Osmer vociferously supported him. If Radin didn't get the job, argued Osmer, "then the time-honored American practice of working your way to the top is not possible in Watsonville."

But then-Councilman Rex Clark maintained that Radin, was "not qualified" for the position under the provisions of the city charter. Radin had pointed out in a memo to the council that he would soon be eligible for the position because of his years of service as assistant city manager. Clark, however, argued that Radin had been an "assistant city manager" by title only, not in actuality. And he accused Radin of wanting to "violate the charter by giving himself the job."

In the end, the council, with Osmer dissenting, voted to hire Jim Buell, then assistant city manager of Bakersfield. Following the decision, Mayor Johnston said Radin would probably be given a newly created position of assistant city manager — a job that never materialized.

In the early part of the decade, one of the most heated controversies at City Hall involved a rift between the City Council and Planning Commission that resulted in four planning commissioners turning in their resignations. The council wanted to form a redevelopment district on the west side, saying a new fire road was needed — a claim that was backed up by the fire chief. But the majority of the commission maintained that the district would, in effect, give the west side property owners a "free ride," because there was no evidence that they were willing to "help themselves." Also, commissioners argued, the district would "siphon off" property taxes, thereby depriving the rest of the city and valley of needed taxes.

But throughout most of the decade, relations between the city's governmental bodies — as well as within governmental bodies — were generally amiable. After May 1979, both the Planning Commission and the council were dominated by "slowth-growth" advocates, so the decisions of the two bodies rarely clashed. Even when differences between individuals arose, the tone of the arguments was mostly civil and neighborly. Despite the dramatic growth and changes in Watsonville, it was apparent that the small-town milieu was still intact. Never did the council members or commissioners resort to the type of bickering heard in the chambers of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

As one councilman once told a reporter: "Yeah, we fight. But then we go have coffee together after the meeting."