

Spanish-style design approved for Watsonville redevelopment

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WATSONVILLE — A Spanish-style architectural design submitted by one of the Latino business owners being displaced by redevelopment was approved for the 100 block of Main Street Tuesday night.

The City Council, acting as the Redevelopment Agency, unanimously adopted the design theme proposed by Stella Romo as a guide to rebuild the 100 block at Main Street, Riverside Drive and Union Street.

Romo plans to buy up to 75 percent of the 100 block and develop it during the next three to five years into restaurants, retail stores, a cocktail lounge and an open-air mercado catering to the city's large Latino population.

"I like the idea of a mercado," said Councilman Dennis Osmer, who made the motion to accept Romo's plan. "We've driven a lot of people out of the 200 block and we can't afford to drive them any farther."

Romo's parents are Pete and Maria Sanchez, the long-time prop-

erty and business owners of the Pasa Tiempo Club, Mi Casita Restaurant and Discoteca Mexico. Romo and her husband, Ramiro Romo, own the Jalisco Restaurant nearby.

They are among the two dozen business owners forced out of their present location by the city's plan to redevelop the 200 block of Main Street.

The design, drawn by Watsonville architect Nora Centeno, calls for a long, two-story stucco building with tile roof and an archway on Main Street, a la downtown Santa Barbara, in the words of Councilman Vido Deretich. It's similar to one of the proposals drawn by staff planner Richard Emigh, who unveiled six different designs for the agency to begin considering last month.

After the meeting, Romo said she was gratified by the city's acceptance of her plan.

"Having us develop it (the 100 block) is what we always wanted. We're really pleased to be part of it." She said property owners she's contacted support her proposal, and said she's hopeful all will eventually

go along with the design.

Centeno, the architect, added, "We're from Watsonville and we know the community. We don't need an outsider to tell us what to do."

Coincidentally, earlier in the meeting the Redevelopment Agency had approved the purchase of the Sanchez property on the 200 block, for a total of \$535,000.

City Manager John Radin said the sale marked the final acquisition for the redevelopment project. Two-thirds of the block has been bought by the U.S. Post Office for a new facility, and the rest of the block is being negotiated for development by San Jose developer Barry Swenson.

One of the major hurdles facing Romo as she moves forward with her plan for the 100 block is what to do with the dilapidated boarding house she is negotiating to buy at 53 Union St.

The building is notorious for its drug addicts and other illegal activities that take place. As City Attorney Don Haile said, "I have a stack of police reports this big on my desk," indicating a pile 5 inches deep. "There are drunks, drug deals,

all kinds of goings on."

Romo would like to keep the building in operation after it's renovated so she can continue to draw revenue from it. But the city has already moved legally to shut the place down for the third time in as many years, according to Haile.

"It's a deplorable, stinking, rotting condition that cannot continue to exist," said Haile.

But other council members were willing to give Romo a crack at the problem. Councilman Osmer said it wasn't fair to put the onus of the drug problems of lower Watsonville on one building, saying, "It's a problem that characterizes all of the lower end."

And Councilman Tony Campos said it was "important to have this housing renovated. We need it for the people who work in the fields and the canneries who can't afford" high-priced dwellings.

Romo pledged to fix the building once she purchases it. And she said after the meeting that she would hire a full-time on-site manager to keep the troublemakers out.