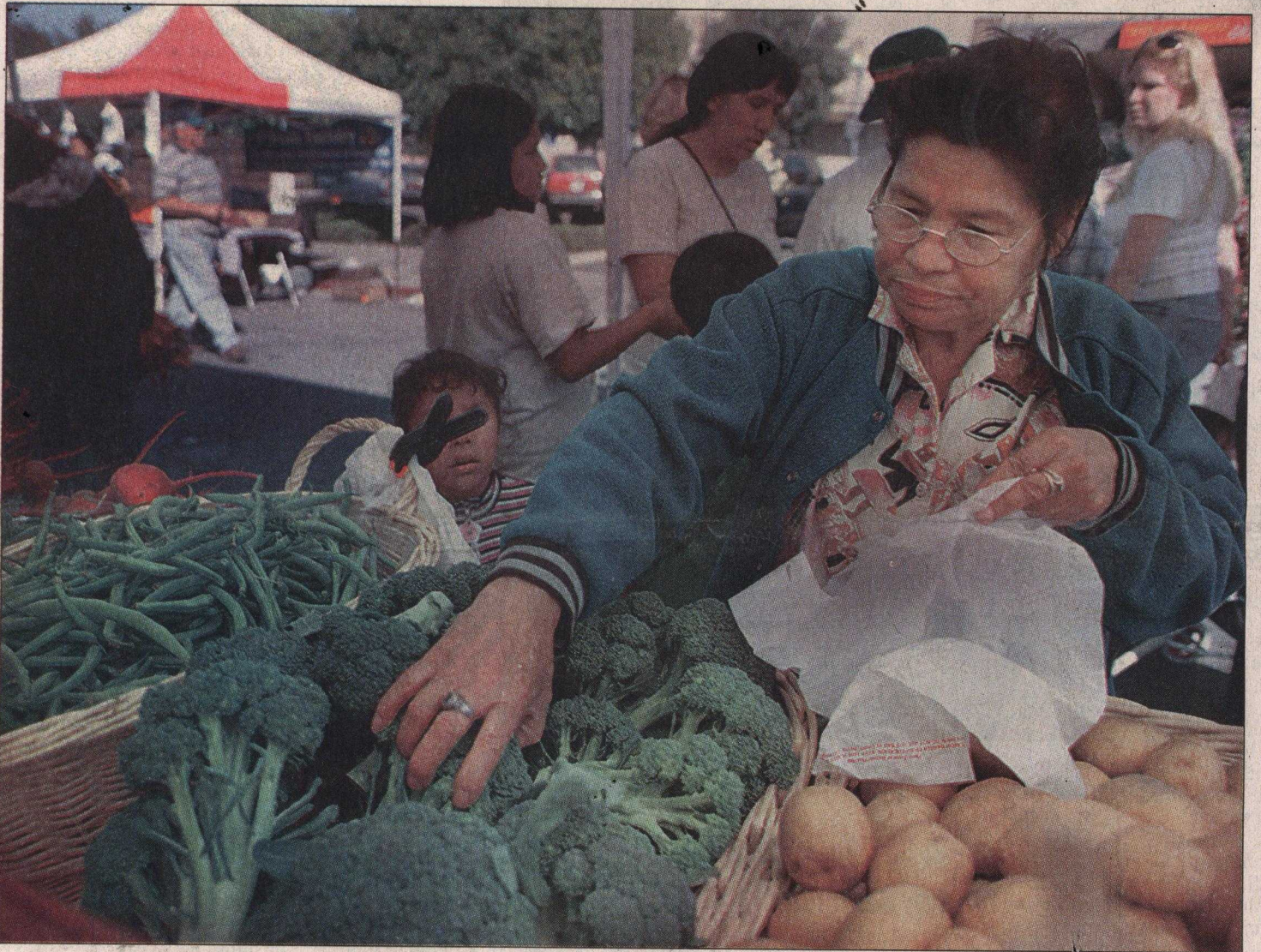


City officials want to add a little ethnic flavor
to the weekly downtown *mercado*

SPICING UP

Watsonville's farmers market



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Berta Andrade looks over some of the fresh vegetables at the weekly farmers market in downtown Watsonville.

By **STETT HOLBROOK**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

✓ **Farmers Market**
WATSONVILLE

As farmers markets in Santa Cruz, Aptos and Live Oak flourish, Watsonville's 3-year-old version has yet to take root.

While market organizers have shied away from targeting any one group of potential customers, Watsonville's mayor and others say the Friday market needs to appeal more to local tastes if it's ever going to click with the city's Latino majority.

"As long as we try to pretend we're something that we're not, it's not going to work," said Mayor Oscar Rios.

He said it's time to stop tip-toeing around the fact that most Watsonville residents are Latino — an estimated 65 percent of the city's roughly 40,000 residents. While he wants the market to offer produce and other prod-

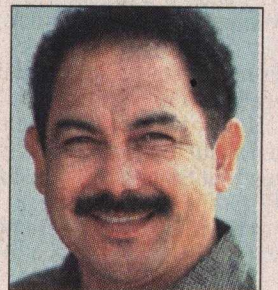
ucts that will attract all kinds of shoppers, the market will do best if it gives the city's Latino majority a reason to come downtown, he said.

"I want to see the farmers market reflect the demographics this community has," he said. "In the process of trying to please everyone, we're missing the point. We're still cautious and resistant to using our strength."

Most working-class Watsonville residents don't coo over organic carrots and baby bok choy the way shoppers in Santa Cruz and Aptos do. Watsonville's Peck Street market sits in the heart of the Pajaro Valley, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Many Watsonville residents who work the fertile strawberry and lettuce fields come from Mexico, where *mercados* and weekly produce markets are the norm.

In Mexico and Latin America, outdoor markets sell fresh produce, dried chili peppers, cheese, tortillas and fruit juices as well as inexpensive prepared foods and kitchen supplies. The bustling *mercados* also draw

Please see **MARKET** on **BACK PAGE**



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MAYOR OSCAR RIOS

7-2300

Market: Watsonville seeks to spice up its weekly *mercado*

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tourists looking for local color.

Watsonville market organizers seem to have learned they cannot offer a smaller version of Santa Cruz's market, and are now trying to appeal to different income levels. The market recently adopted new hours — 4 to 8 p.m. — to make it more accessible to working families, and organizers have added more vendors to increase variety.

The market was envisioned by city officials as a means of attracting shoppers downtown. Unlike Santa Cruz, downtown Watsonville has been slow to recover from the Loma Prieta earthquake. While new businesses are opening, the city's core is not exactly bustling.

Until market organizers began a new promotional campaign and held a grand re-opening a week ago to showcase the new hours and vendors, the market had been limping along with a dozen vendors and a few hundred shoppers. It remains to be seen if the market will take off the way city officials hope.

Rios suggests pulling in a catering truck or food vendors to sell tacos, cocktail de camarones and other cheap but tasty street food as a way of drawing Latinos to the market.

To the credit of the Watsonville market, vendors have accepted food vouchers from the beginning and organizers have been trying to attract more Latino farmers.

Lea Goodman manages the Watsonville market as well markets in Santa Cruz and Live Oak. From the beginning, she and other organizers did not want to target to any one group.

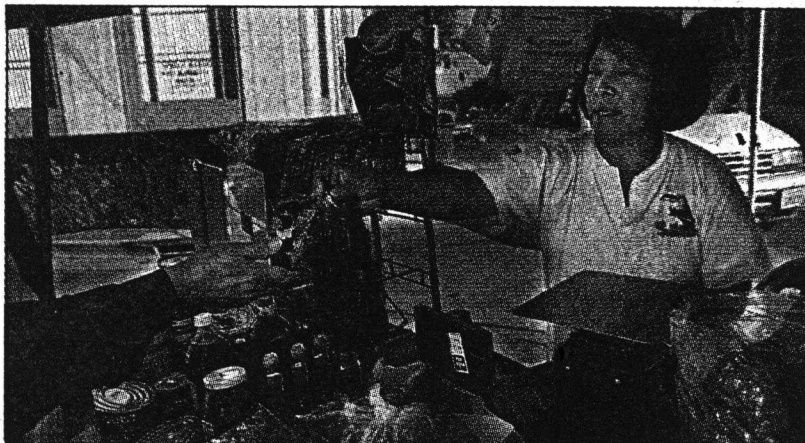
"We don't want any one group to be singled out," she said. "It has never been our intention to make it a strictly Latino market. We want to attract all kinds of people."

But as he shopped at the market Friday, Ruben Chavez said the market needs more local flavor.

"It needs to cater more to the Latino population," he said. "There's just the basics here. It needs more spice."

Thanks to the recent outreach to pull in new vendors, one now sells Mexican spices as well as candied sweet potatoes, toasted pumpkin seeds and other Mexican specialties.

Offering a glimpse of what could come, Maria Peña, owner of Mexican Dried Products, runs a screen-draped booth at the end of the market and does steady business selling bags of Mexican candy and spices.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Maria Peña, who owns Mexican Dried Products, runs a booth at the market where she sells Mexican candy and spices.

"I'm thinking about making tamales," she said.

But what the market really needs is a little music to liven things up, she said.

Councilman Rafael Lopez agrees. Because many Watsonville residents work in agriculture, the market must offer more than food, he said.

"For most people (in Watsonville), the thought of buying vegetables from a farmer is not a novelty," he said. "It's got to be a social gathering place."

Lopez said entertainment, especially music, is the way to bring people downtown.

"I just want to bring as many people down there, period," he said.

Vance Corum, an exuberant farmers market consultant, spent a couple weeks in Watsonville trying to figure out why the market was not connecting with residents.

"I just got a sense we were not hitting our target audience," he said. "It wasn't working for the general folk."

Corum, a Washington resident who has helped create markets in California for more than 20 years, said successful markets appeal to both low- and upper-income groups. To put Watsonville's market on stronger footing, he instituted several changes.

With only a dozen vendors, there was little variety and price competition, he said. He solicited new vendors in hopes of tripling the number of stalls. He also tried to bring in vendors selling prepared food, including pizza, Indian food and tacos.

Although many of the vendors who agreed to show up did not, Corum got commitments from several to stick it out four weeks to see if his plan works.

"If you get enough produce and vari-

ety, people will come," he said. "The challenge is finding people with the willingness to respond and take the risk."

While not targeting Latino residents directly, Corum said greater variety, more convenient hours and prepared food will make the market more popular with the city's majority.

The city re-opened the market July 14 with twice as many vendors. The event was dubbed a salsa festival and featured salsa dancing, a salsa-tasting contest and a hot chili pepper-eating contest.

Results were mixed. The entertainment brought in more people than ever before. Many vendors said sales were brisk.

But vendors on a closed section of Main Street, shut down for the first time to accommodate additional sellers, complained of exhaust fumes and the fear of being clipped by a car. Friday the market went back to just Peck Street.

Rosie Sotelo Armijo, a marketing specialist for the state Department of Health, has worked with 22 farmers markets across the state to promote the consumption of fresh produce among Latinos. With cooking demonstrations and games, she touts the health benefits of fresh produce.

Except for those in large cities such as Oakland and San Francisco, Armijo said, markets generally fare poorly in low-income Latino areas. But produce markets in Latino areas that couple with flea markets do well, she said.

Key to success is making residents feel like the market is part of the community, she said, prompting a nod from Andy Fisher, executive director of the Venice-based Food Security

Coalition.

The organization published a study on farmers markets in low-income communities, "Hot Peppers and Parking Lot Peaches." Fisher said markets in low-income areas need subsidies in the form of federally supported food coupons and the patronage of middle-income customers to survive. Community organizing and bilingual vendors are key, too, he said.

The study includes case studies of successful and unsuccessful markets across the United States. While thriving markets do not cater exclusively to any ethnic group, the produce reflects their communities.

The 16-year-old Richmond market in a poor, racially mixed area has succeeded by giving the city's different ethnic groups what they want.

"When word got out that Asian farmers were coming to the market for the first time, the Asian community mobbed their trucks," Fisher wrote. "Indians and Southeast Asians alike flocked there. ... The first time farmers brought in black-eyed peas, they sold out immediately to African-American customers, many of whom has migrated from the South and hadn't seen fresh black-eyes peas in years."

Joe Aliotti has been selling fish at the Watsonville market since it opened and later opened a fish market. While he has been critical of the lack of parking at the market, he is committed to staying. He said targeting the market to Latinos could improve sales but any change would be slow in coming.

"You're not going to make something turn around overnight," he said.

Farmers markets

WATSONVILLE CERTIFIED FARMERS MARKET:

■ From 4-8 p.m. Fridays, May through November, on Peck Street at the Watsonville Plaza. For more information, call 335-7443.

OTHER LOCAL MARKETS:

■ Aptos, 8 a.m. to noon Saturdays at the Cabrillo College lower parking lot.

■ Santa Cruz, from 2:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesdays at the corner of Cedar and Lincoln streets.

■ Live Oak, from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. at the East Cliff Village shopping center.

■ Felton, from 2:30-7 p.m. Tuesdays at the Presbyterian Church, 6090 Highway 9.