

# New rumblings on Lower Main

By STEVE SHENDER

Merchants and property owners in the 100 block of Main Street want a say in the shape of things to come for their end of town.

And, increasingly worried that the city's plans for downtown redevelopment might fail to take their concerns into account, they are moving to do something about it.

With the help of El Pajaro Community Development Corporation, a non-profit organization which provides assistance to small businesses, landowners and business people in the 100 block are seeking their own developer to turn the blighted block around.

Bounded by the Pajaro River on the south, Riverside Drive on the north and Union and Rodriguez streets on the east and west, Main Street's 100 block is considered the key to the city's hopes for downtown revitalization — so much so, that officials around City Hall refer to it as the "superblock."

Plans drafted by the city's redevelopment consultants call for the street's closing and construction of a major shopping center in the 100 block. The proposed shopping center development, whose shape has yet to be determined, would supplant the bars, gas stations, transient housing and vacant lots which dominate the area now.

It would, redevelopment advocates hope, become a powerful commercial magnet, drawing thousands of shoppers, who would spill over from the center to a semi-mall on Main Street.

(The center would also, it is hoped, become the financial engine of downtown revitalization, generating new property tax revenues for improvements to the north and triggering more private investment downtown.)

Despite the fact that development of the 100 block is considered vital to downtown revitalization, and despite the fact that city officials have known for nearly a year that major changes may be in store for the area, until recently apparently no one from the city had bothered to speak with superblock businessmen and property owners about the city's plans or the procedures it intended to follow on the road to redevelopment.

The omission was apparently intentional, at least on the part of city Redevelopment Director Russ Hoss, who told a Chamber of Commerce gathering recently that he had been "reluctant to go into the area and stir up concerns."

"I felt I had to have a completed plan first," Hoss said. "Once a plan is adopted, it will be time to go down and talk to these people about their relocation problems."

"I'm reluctant to go down there too early in the ballgame," he said.

Late last week superblock businessmen and property owners, worried that the city might not come to them until the last pitch to the last batter was already on its way to the plate, went to the city instead, requesting a meeting with city officials.

The group learned — from City Manager John Radin and council members Vido Deretich, Rex Clark and Betty Murphy, who met with them a week ago at Watsonville Federal Savings — that, contrary to their fears, the city's plans for the superblock were still a long way from being cast in concrete.

Radin told the group, which included El Pajaro officials and nine of 14 affected property owners and business people, that his "door is always open," and that the city was "willing to listen to anybody with a firm development proposal."

"There's really no commitment (by the city) until we sign an agreement," Radin subsequently explained.

Superblock business people and property owners would like that agreement signed with them — or at least with a developer of their choosing.

Encouraged by Radin's remarks, El Pajaro, acting on behalf its 100-block constituents, embarked this week on a search for a qualified developer. The agency hopes to find a developer by March 30, the date set for a climactic hearing on the city's downtown redevelopment plan.

The Redevelopment Agency — in actuality, the City Council — is to decide then whether to accept the consultant's recommendation that the 100 block of Main Street be closed and whether the city should use its powers of condemnation, if necessary, to assemble land for sale to a prospective developer. According to Radin, serious negotiations for development of the superblock cannot begin until those issues are resolved.

Though El Pajaro has yet to find a developer, the agency already has some development plans on tap. On its own initiative, El Pajaro recently hired an architect to do renderings of an ambitious three-level commercial-residential complex for the superblock.

The drawings, unveiled to Radin and the three council members last week, depict an open-air center inspired by Mayan architectural motifs, with a ground-level parking area surrounding a plaza and farmers market, a second-level shopping arcade and apartments on the third level.

Like the proposal developed nearly a year ago by the city's

consultant, the El Pajaro plan calls for traffic to be diverted around the shopping center on Union and Rodriguez streets. Under the El Pajaro proposal, the two streets would become one-way, north- and southbound, respectively.

Unlike the consultant's plan, the El Pajaro proposal does not call for a traffic signal south of the new center, at the foot of the Pajaro River Bridge. Instead, traffic signals would be located at the intersections of Union and Rodriguez streets with Riverside Drive.

The El Pajaro traffic scheme drew a favorable comment from

*"Watsonville should not settle for something that's been done everywhere from San Jose to Elko, Nevada."*

Deretich, who said, "The road pattern is way better than what our consultant presented." Deretich said he still favored keeping Main Street open, however.

If El Pajaro is successful in its search for a bona fide developer (who will have to put up some "earnest money" to show his sincerity), the city will have at least two, and possibly three developers vying for the right to renovate the superblock.

Only one firm, Hoffman and Associates (in conjunction with Coldwell Banker, a national real estate brokerage, investment, development and property management company) has so far come forward with a detailed qualification statement and a \$5,000 earnest money deposit. A second firm, Hare, Brewer and Kelley Inc., of Palo Alto, has also indicated some interest in developing the 100 block.

Hoffman and Associates, which submitted a 25-page qualification statement and 27 pages of finan-

REFERENCE

cial data, as yet has no specific plans for the property, having advanced only a very general proposal for a retail shopping center "anchored" by a major department store.

Hare, Brewer and Kelley, which submitted its proposal in a 1½-page, single-spaced letter, has suggested the property be developed for a "small amount of retail use, some space for community activities and principally, office space designed to attract ... high technology industrial (tenants)."

In the view of Julio Villamil, who owns two service stations and a vacant lot in the superbloc, and who last year urged El Pajaro to find a developer for the area, a shopping center will not succeed there unless it is "unique."

"It would be ridiculous to think a shopping center like Pajaro Valley or Crestview is going to make it there," said Villamil, who instigated last week's meeting with Radin and city council members. "We need something unique — attractive to tourists," he said.

El Pajaro Executive Director Bill Shelton sounded a similar note recently, saying the superbloc development must "uniquely reflect the cultural diversity and creativity of our community." Watsonville, Shelton said, should not settle "for something that's been done everywhere, from San Jose to Elko, Nevada."

If Villamil and other superbloc business people and property owners want to be sure of a say in the ultimate shape of the 100 block's development, then they will almost have to find their "own" developer, Radin made clear just before last week's meeting.

"Once the property is sold, the property owners have no control," Radin said. "It rests in the hands of the (Redevelopment) Agency and the developer. The ultimate shape of the center will be what the Redevelopment Agency and the developer agree on.

"We're going to listen to people," said Radin, "but after all, the person who's going to put up the money will have the final say."



**CHANGING SCENE** — A year ago, this vacant gas station was typical of the block under consideration. Owner

Julio Villamil has spruced it up, but now faces relocation under the city's redevelopment plan.