

✓ CF EARTHQUAKE - 1989 - WATSONVILLE REBUILDING RP

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Block by block



Kurt Ellison

At the new Pajaro Valley Bank on Main Street this morning, financial services officer Phil

Lawrence, left, talks with Bill Peterson, an assistant vice president.

Pace picks up in downtown rebuilding

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

The future of downtown Watsonville is suddenly taking shape, with some big plans now backed up by big bucks.

In March, five months after the Oct. 17 earthquake devastated much of downtown, a team of urban experts from the Urban Land Institute, based in Washington, D.C., came to Watsonville and spent an intensive week of study on how the city should rebuild.

Five months later, their finished report has not yet arrived. Some of the ideas they presented, such as moving the Watsonville Municipal Court to the 200 block of Main Street, and appointing an executive director with broad powers to speed projects along in the downtown area, have turned out to be unrealistic.

Other recommendations, such as the experts' strong support for a *mercado*, or permanent open-air market, took hold instantly and are still under discussion.

Other projects along Main Street that were not earthquake-related are humming along. For instance, the new post office and Barry Swenson Developers shopping center on the 200 block have received final approval in the

past few months. The post office is under construction, and Swenson hopes to break ground on the shopping center by October.

Some of the other plans and projects along Main Street include:

- On the 100 block, the city has obliged a non-profit Salinas group, Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association, by changing the zoning to allow plans for low-income family housing. CHISPA has entered into purchase agreements for three of the four acres on the site.

- On the 200 block, the single-story Swenson shopping center will face City Hall. It may include retail stores, offices, restaurants, theaters and other uses, but bars will not be allowed under the special use permit, in part because of opposition from Police Chief Terry Medina.

On the east side of the street, the Fox Theatre will open in a few months, according to owner Hank Garcia, complete with new back wall, new sound system and some sort of shop or shops in part of the lobby.

- The 300 block west owners banded together in the months following the earthquake and hired architect Bob Corbett to redesign their razed buildings.

Corbett presented his plans to the City Council in May.

The new buildings will be set back farther from the street by 30 feet, and will carry over design elements from the Plaza and the Fox Theatre across the street. Most will be two stories, with either offices or studio apartments on the second floors.

The plans are enhanced by the repairs now under way at Rico Pollo, which is in one of the only buildings on the block not demolished after the quake; and by word from Sacramento last week that funds will come through for a three-story parking garage in back of Rico Pollo and Monterey Savings Bank.

- On the 400 block, Ford's Department Store has received a \$24.1 million low-interest disaster relief loan from the Small Business Administration, which will allow it to rebuild its razed department store on the same spot.

On the east side of the street, the pink Mansion House was sold in July to Santa Cruz business partners Terry Guy and Misha Jones. The two say they have rented out nearly all the offices in the building. The first floor will house the county's Human Resources Agency.

The 400 block east property owners and merchants have begun meeting weekly to discuss, among other things, ways to spruce up the backs of their buildings. The idea is to create a corridor through the middle of the block in a direct line from the bandstand in the Plaza.

The Watsonville Chamber of Commerce will rebuild its office there, as it has received the first chunk of an \$80,000 federal disaster-relief grant.

- The San Jose-based Housing for Independent People announced in June that it had entered into purchase agreements for the Resetar Hotel, and for the Jefsen Hotel, which is kitty-corner to the Resetar.

The non-profit group has received state funds to cover most of the costs for buying and repairing the two residential hotels.

- On the 600 block, Jalisco Restaurant is still planning to move into the Spanish-style building that formerly housed PG&E offices in the near future.

In fact, Planning Director Maureen Owens said the only places where nothing is happening are the old IOOF hall site on the Plaza, the Masonic hall site behind the Fox, and the Western Auto site between Burdick's and the Resetar on Main Street.