

City's future at stake

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

The heated issues of 1980 coalesced into one big one. Emotion-laden discussions of historical preservation, downtown revitalization and new shopping centers inevitably focused on how Watsonville perceived itself — and how its residents envisioned the town's future. "Community identity" was the phrase that began creeping into the Watsonville vernacular in 1980.

The city, many residents felt, was growing less quaint, more sterile and, in the process, losing its character. The concern often manifested itself in tense emotion and overflowing crowds in City Council chambers. And in many ways, the steamy issues of 1980 appeared to be setting the stage for some fiery controversies throughout the decade.

The '80s began with a bang. When the council on Jan. 8 voted 5-2 to tear down the 75-year-old Porter Building for no apparent reason except that it had a cheap demolition bid, the action shocked and outraged preservation buffs and redevelopment devotees.

"I feel like someone's been murdered," exclaimed Pat Pirtle of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. She promptly organized a campaign to send black wreaths to City Hall.

The furor caused city fathers to hastily back down — and indefinitely delay the demolition.

Monte Lewis, president of the downtown-oriented Watsonville Area Development Corporation, called the council's original decision to demolish the building a "blessing in disguise" because it woke up dormant downtown forces.

Before the coals of the Porter Building issue cooled, city officials became entangled in another hot issue: a proposed shopping center at Green Valley Road and Main Street.

When the Planning Commission held its first hearing last winter, throngs turned out to protest the 115,000 square-foot center, with downtown businessmen and longtime redevelopment advocates expressing fear that the center would thrust a dagger into the city's heart.

"You're exaggerating," responded the developers and their eloquent spokesman, Watsonville attorney Tom Skillicorn, who asked city officials not to nurture economic "protectionism."

"Good merchandizing," he said, was one way to revive the downtown.

The attorney denied that the council had neglected the central business district, pointing to the numerous new buildings that have popped up in the downtown over the past dozen years.

But downtown supporters maintained they were only being realistic — that the project would set back, if not kill, the revitalization movement, which had shown signs of life during the past year or so. They urged city fathers and mothers to make a strong commitment to rejuvenating the city's core, which they said reflected Watsonville's architectural and historical heritage.

"People are hungry for a sense of community," asserted Bill Shelton of El Pajaro Community Development Corporation.

The Planning Commission, however, decided it wasn't in the business of determining "economic impacts," and voted to approve developer Bill Burgstrom's requested change in the General Plan, paving the way for the center.

But at the council level, the issue divided the body. The council on July 15 voted 4-3 to approve the General Plan change, with downtown supporters crying foul. They said they hadn't attended the meeting because it had been billed a routine "study session."

"We've been had," said Councilman Charles Palmtag, referring to the council majority's contention that it was simply changing the General Plan, not approving a shopping center.

Former Watsonville senior planner Chuck Rowe later charged that the council had "violated the spirit, if not the letter," of state laws governing the "noticing" of public hearings.

Amid the controversy, two views of progress seemed to be emerging in Watsonville, a city that until a few short years ago didn't have to wrestle with the problems of booming growth. One view, with Mayor Bill Johnston as its chief spokesman, held that progress came through unfettered free enterprise. New shopping centers, the mayor argued, would provide more convenient shopping as well as more sales tax for city coffers drained by Proposition 13. "You can't force people to go downtown," said Johnston.

But opponents of the new shopping centers (two others had been approved within the past 18 months) contended that the council's encouragement of "commercial dispersion" violated the principles of sound economic planning. True progress in Watsonville, they said, would entail the "recycling of existing commercial areas."

Some redevelopment advocates admitted flatly that they were in favor of economic protectionism. "Protect the vitality of the city's core," beseeched Roger Hoffman, renovator of the Mansion House.

Palmtag, considered a moderate on the council, agreed that the council might be zoning too much of the city commercial. He went so far as to say that this could lead to large-scale blight and arson.

The issue of "community identity" also came home again at the tail end of the year as Wells Fargo Bank prepared to demolish the 81-year-old Marinovich Building at the southeast corner of the historic Plaza.

Saying it was a last-resort measure to stop the "madness," Chuck Rowe and the Environmental Law Fund filed suit in Santa Cruz County Superior Court, obtaining a temporary restraining order.

City and bank officials were furious, but the historical preservation movement picked up steam. In less than 24 hours, Rowe and other historical rehabilitation advocates gathered over \$1,500 in pledges to set up a "preservation defense fund."

Politics by lawsuit had entered the Watsonville political milieu.

All the controversy exemplified the increasing polarization of the council — and perhaps the community as a whole. And with council elections coming up in May, the loud voices aren't about to tone down in 1981.

Other "running stories" in Watsonville this year included:

—City Hall's continuing fight with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency over a federal mandate to upgrade Watsonville's sewage treatment plant. The issue exploded in early autumn when Congress passed an amendment to a water pollution law, in effect requiring industry to pay "out of pocket" its share of the costs of new treatment facilities. Prior to passage of the amendment, industry would have been allowed to pay back a "grant" over a 30-year period at no interest. Watsonville food processors said the new law could drive many of them out of business. But at year's end, city officials were confident they could beat an EPA deadline and get the "grant" for the food processing industry after all.

—The police officers' anger at the council's decision last summer to unilaterally impose a five-day work week on them after contract negotiations reached an impasse. The officers had considered their 10-hour, four-day work week a prime — and deserved — benefit. Following the council's decision, police talked of taking "job action," but eventually decided only to cut down on "volunteer" activities. A few policemen made good on prior threats to leave to work for other law enforcement agencies. Meanwhile, the city started construction on the long-awaited police station just south of City Hall.

—Street crime and, in particular, youth gang violence continued to concern Watsonville residents, especially in the wake of the stabbing deaths on Mt. Madonna of two teenagers in February. Criticism that City Hall had failed to address the issue was mollified somewhat after the council voted to reopen the Boys' Club building to house the Police Activities League, a pet project of Police Chief Al Williams.

—Pinto Lake. The City Council last spring voted to ban speedboats and charge "walk-in" and "drive-in" fees as part of a comprehensive plan to upgrade the park. The plan also involved the hiring of park rangers and two park aides. The council, however, quickly rescinded its decision to charge the walk-in fees after citizens protested, and several months later voted to get rid of the park employees and weekday fees after the plan proved to be a financial flop. Weekend fees, however, are still being charged, and speedboats are still banned.

—The city attempted to buy "air space" from about 80 homeowners who live near Watsonville Airport, offering \$1,000 to each homeowner under a program pushed by the Federal Aviation Administration. But the resulting brouhaha caused city officials to cancel their purchase plans. Late in the year, they tried to get the homeowners to trim trees that obtrude into the airport "clear zone," but many of the property owners balked again.

—The city's long-awaited Design Review Commission was born in September. The same month, it rejected a modified A-Frame design for a large Green Valley Road subdivision. The developer threatened to sue and told Planning Director Bob Ellenwood (who agreed with the commission's decision) to "go to hell." But the commissioners stood their ground, and eventually the developer redesigned the project.