Watsonville merchants submit rebuilding plans

By JAMIE MARKS
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WATSONVILLE — Plans for rebuilding the decimated 300 block of Main Street are being floated to city officials by three of the four property owners.

Bob Corbett, a local architect, has been hired by landholders Sewart Kett, Stella and Ramiro Romo, and Jim and George Petroutsas to design a master plan that encompasses nearly the entire 300 block of Main Street.

And in another part of downtown, Ford's Department store, which lost three buildings in the earthquake, including its anchor store in downtown Watsonville, is hoping to open by early next week in the refurbished former Dick Bruhn's store at West Beach and Rodriguez streets.

George Menasco, president of Ford's, said he wants to open as "soon as we get our occupancy permit."

Chief Building Inspector Neil England said the permit could be ready by Monday, if the renovations to the 30,000 square-foot building are complete.

Ford's has been operating at the Crossroads Shopping Center and Westridge Business Park since the earthquake.

The only 300-block property owner not taking part in the discussions with Corbett is Mort Console, who, according to city records, owns a 29-foot wide piece of property that will eventually become the corner of the block. Console used to own Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods Co., which folded nearly three years ago under a mountain of debt following a lengthy strike by Teamsters.

The plan being designed by Corbett involves changing some of the traffic patterns downtown.

Already, the City Council has authorized opening negotiations with the owners of the former Canada Shoe store to buy their property at Main and Second streets so that Second Street can be widened. Once widened, it will also be directly aligned with Maple Street.

City Manager John Radin said Second Street is only 30 feet wide, but with the inclusion of the Canada Shoe property, the street will become the standard 44-foot width. If the Canada Shoes property is bought for realigning the street, then Console's property will be left at the corner.

The other side of Second Street will become the redevelopment project proposed by Barry Swenson, a San Jose developer.

The 300-block plans include rebuilding the Romos' popular Jalisco Restaurant and Watsonville Jeans store, and bringing back Ace Hardware, according to Corbett.

Kett would like to include single-room occupancy residential units on the second floor of his building, Corbett said.

Corbett sees the block as becoming the "heritage block" of Watsonville, as it's located directly across from the City Plaza.

Special care will be paid to the architecture of the buildings, and none will be taller than two stories, he said.

"We've done some master planning, using almost the entire block. And the property owners are anxious to work together," Corbett said.

Corbett hasn't presented city officials with an application for a project yet, and said that the plans are still in the preliminary stages. But he expects more details to be released soon, after he has a chance to meet with city department heads next week.

"The property owners have all got the resources to do it. It's not like they're waiting for the city to help them. But we do want to get as much input as we can (from the public)," Corbett said.

The new City Council has made it clear it wants residential units located downtown and is meeting today with the Economic Development Committee of the Chamber of Commerce to formulate a reconstruction plan for downtown.

All but two buildings on the 300 block of Main Street were destroyed in the Oct. 17 earthquake. Both of the remaining buildings are owned by the Petroutsas brothers. They include Monterey Savings, which is open, and Rico Pollo, which is closed until a wall is repaired.

Corbett said the tentative plans call for including the Petroutsas properties in the final design for the 300 block.

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