

Historic Houses - South County

Sentinel — Monday, September 21, 1998 — A-3

Mansion House serves up restaurant plan

Owner asks council for liquor license

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The historic Mansion House soon may feature an upscale restaurant for the first time since the former owners gave up on downtown eight years ago.

On Tuesday, the City Council will consider giving owner Elena Tufo a special-use permit that would allow her to sell alcohol, a key to attracting a successful restaurateur to the project.

"It's just huge for downtown," said Nancy Moore Wright, special projects manager for the city's Redevelopment Agency. "Right now, there's no white-tablecloth restaurant downtown, and there's a real need for that."

City officials hope an upscale restaurant will draw more people downtown in the evening hours, something every successful main street needs, especially one still shaking off the effects of the 1989 earthquake.

Mayor Dennis Osmer said the debate Tuesday will center on whether Watsonville needs another business that sells alcohol vs. the need to restore "a pretty important piece" of downtown.

The Mansion House, 420 Main St., started life as a hotel in 1871. Thomas Beck built the three-story building for \$25,000. In 1914, it was moved 110 feet on a system of log rollers to its current location to make room for the Lettunich Building.

By the late 1960s, the building had significantly deteriorated, and was facing the wrecking ball by 1978. But the Pajaro Valley Historical Association stepped in, eventually selling the building for \$10 on the stipulation that it be restored.

By 1981, the rejuvenated Mansion House featured a popular, critically acclaimed restaurant. Just nine years later, however, new owners decided to turn the ground floor into office space, noting that downtown didn't have enough foot traffic to sustain a Mansion House restaurant.

Wright believes times have changed in Watsonville, and with downtown on the upswing and the nearby Mello Performing Arts Center drawing crowds in the evening hours, an upscale restaurant could be successful.

"People love the good Mexican restaurants we have downtown, but they want some variety," said Wright, she said renovations throughout downtown have the potential for restoring Main Street to its former glory. "It's going to be dazzling."

The restorations include the Jefsen Building, which features new apartments; and the Kalich Building now under construction, which will offer retail on the ground floor and apartments above.

"Things are going on downtown," said Wright. "(The Mansion House renovation) is a great impetus because it's a tie to the past as well as a look to the future."

Owner Tufo agreed with Wright, noting that she's talking with at least three restaurant owners who are interested in Watsonville.

She plans to return the ground floor to

its historic look, creating both a restaurant and full bar. The second and third floors will remain office space.

The most recent ground-floor tenant was the county's Human Resources Agency, which moved to a more expansive space downtown nearly two years ago. The ground floor has been empty since then.

Tufo said she believes in downtown, and "that's why I'm going through the expense of remodeling the interior, because I think it will be good for me and for downtown."

The council, meeting as the Redevelopment Agency board of directors, will consider Tufo's special-use permit on Tuesday at 4 p.m. in the Council Chamber, 250 Main St.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The owner of the renovated Mansion House hopes the building will house an upscale, downtown restaurant.

