

# Local

## City acts to coordinate downtown-recovery work

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Several different groups that focus on downtown Watsonville businesses, or Watsonville businesses in general, need to be better coordinated, City Manager Steve Salomon has said.

Salomon has taken steps toward doing just that by recommending to the City Council two changes it has approved: hiring a "housing and economic development director" and giving official sanction to the informal group that had been calling itself the Downtown Recovery Committee.

"It seemed to me that we weren't in an earthquake mode, a crisis mode, anymore," Salomon said. "The groups were beginning to ask questions about parking and design, and why that building is boarded up, and what can we do to clean up graffiti — longterm things that needed more follow-through and staff support."

The Downtown Recovery Committee has now become the Watsonville Development Committee, and it will be formally approved as a city committee once a list of members has been agreed on. A first list, provided by the group itself, was rejected because critics said there were too few Latinos on it.

Another group that has gotten into gear is the Economic Development Department (EDD), which the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce operates through a contract with the city; and the Central Business Improvement District (CBID). And that's not even counting all the committees to the chamber. There is cross-over among some of the groups' members, but no real coordination.

The CBID has always had a problem communicating, even to its own members, what its function is. For that reason, it is now

calling itself the Downtown Merchants Association. Laurie Petruzzi, the group's 10-hour-a-week staff person, says the new moniker has made a difference.

"People relate better, there's more connection," she said.

The group has an annual budget of between \$20,000 and \$25,000, Salomon said. The money comes from annual fees assessed on businesses located in the downtown core.

The CBID was created in the early 1970s with the purpose of doing the big Christmas lighting project each year. That grew to a dozen other projects, all designed to promote the downtown in one way or another.

"Shopping centers have association fees, and this (CBID) represents our association fee," Petruzzi said.

This year, the group has used

an earthquake-relief grant to sponsor television ad spots, has instituted a free summer concert series on Sundays in the Plaza, will hold its annual Celebrity Tricycle Race later this summer, and is putting together a coupon book to be sent out to 25,000 households in August. After that, the traditional holiday promotions, including Christmas lighting, begin.

"It's important to keep people coming downtown on a continuing basis, to let them see that this is here and it's safe, a family community," Petruzzi said. "If you keep them feeling comfortable, when it's time to buy a new dress, they know there are several places downtown."

Andy Blake, the president of the group and owner of Healthways store, said that the CBID had a retreat this year and decided to set aside a precise amount to co-sponsor events. That's one way to support promotions on a shoe-

string and with one part-time staff person, he said. So far, the group has co-sponsored the Cinco De Mayo festival in the Plaza and the Jaycees' Fourth of July parade.

"It hurts a small organization with limited funds not to be able to hire a full-time paid position," Blake said. "We need more volunteers."

A number of months ago, Carlos Rico, the owner of La Flor del Valle market, publicly questioned the priorities of the group, which he had helped found. Rico's criticisms revolved around the group's alleged lack of outreach to the Latino merchants in the Lower Main Street area.

Petruzzi said the major change to come out of the flap was "bringing Carlos down and getting him more involved." He is now on the advisory board and is chairman of the Christmas lighting committee, she said.

The Latino merchants Rico had mentioned still have not gotten involved, however, Petruzzi said. They have grouped together as the South Main Merchants Association, and Petruzzi said she believes that by doing so they have formed a group that "deals more specifically with their concerns. I think they feel very comfortable meeting in that arena."

Blake said that it's not just the South Main merchants that are not actively involved in the Downtown Merchants Association, to which they belong. Out of a total membership of 250, only a half-dozen people show up at most monthly meetings of the CBID board or the committees, he said.

One change that Rico has successfully brought about is that the Christmas lights and decorations will extend to the 100 block of Main this year, Petruzzi said, instead of ending at the 300 block as they did last year.

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