

Ideas flow about how to rebuild downtown

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About two dozen Watsonville business leaders met this morning to begin a process of collecting ideas about how to redevelop downtown without losing ground to large corporate interests from outside the area.

Amy Lyman, a lecturer on the economic development of small towns at UC-Davis, told the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce economic development committee that the key is not to panic.

"Very often, when a community is in crisis and needs redevelopment, it looks to a 'godfather' to come in and solve it all at once," she said. "But the growth of small, family-owned businesses

can diversify the economy and contribute more to providing consistent employment."

Maybe more important, she said, is that keeping small businesses alive keeps up a community's spirit.

Several of those attending the meeting expressed concern that local property owners have been approached since the earthquake by prospective buyers from Southern California and elsewhere.

Only two downtown property owners were present, and the owners of at least one building reportedly didn't attend because they are thinking of selling.

Lyman stressed that small businesses need to band together to negotiate with buyers "who are coming in with a position of strength since they haven't gone through an earthquake."

"You have to be equally strong, to negotiate and let your requests be known," she said. "Get those landowners together and talking so they can have a united front and a spokesperson who can negotiate."

The chairman of the committee, Len West, said the group plans to form a subcommittee to do just that — get property owners and other community members together and bring in more ideas and information.

Lyman said there are other faculty and graduate students in her department at UC-Davis who have "a more than academic interest" in keeping small, agricultural cities like Watsonville afloat and who would be willing to serve as resources. Several offers have come in from architects' or community planners' associations to draw up an overall plan for Watsonville.

Several of those attending today's meeting were also concerned about the estimated one to two years' time to rebuild. John Fry, of the local CDM Corporation, said that will be the case even if all parties cooperate, because there are certain requirements in the permit process that can't be waived without risking lawsuits later.

In the meantime, Lyman said it's important to recognize and plan for "small wins" along the way to economic recovery.

For instance, the city can encourage local banks to offer small, short-term loans to businesses. To a local merchant, taking out such a loan won't feel like such a big risk and might encourage him or her to stick out a rocky time.

Another example of a "small win" is a community college moving classes for small businesses off-campus, into the hard-hit area.

"The small-win idea is that it's very important to have victories along the way that people can see," Lyman said. "When everything seems to be going wrong, it's important to have some things going right."

REFERENCE

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