

# After 'long, bumpy road,' ground broken on 200 Block

From page 1



Amanda Schoenberg/Register-Pajaronian

Mayor Judy Doering-Nielsen (from left), Library Director Deborah Barrow, County Supervisor Tony Campos, Economic Development Administration representative Dianne Church, Santa Cruz County Judge Heather Morse and Presiding Judge Michael Barton broke ground Friday for the Watsonville Civic Center on Main Street.

## '20-year project'

By AMANDA SCHOENBERG  
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Watsonville officials came out en masse Friday to celebrate the official groundbreaking of the 200 Block civic center, superior court and parking structure.

Mayor Judy Doering-Nielsen called Friday an "exciting day for Watsonville," and thanked the numerous government and court officials, city employees and private citizens who brought the plan to fruition.

Reading like a who's who of Watsonville politics, the huge audience gathered for speeches, lunch and cake at the Friday ceremony in the currently vacant lot.

Fourth District Santa Cruz County Supervisor Tony Campos remarked on the "long, bumpy road" that led to the groundbreaking for the 135,000-square-foot structure. He recounted "nerves frizzled, passions revealed and relationships strained" in the process, and thanked the forerunners who first developed the project.

"It is difficult to express how proud I am of this occasion," Campos said.

The 200 Block project, which will include a 460-car parking lot, a new library, courthouse and City Council chambers, has faced an



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Watsonville's 200 Block is pictured as it stood before it was torn down in the mid-1980s.

uphill battle since the city took over the land in the mid-1980s. The mixed-use facility has remained empty since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, as tenant agreements failed, county budgets fell short and design plans evolved.

The final agreement came after the Santa Cruz County Superior Court agreed to fund the remaining \$1 million needed for the project.

Police Chief Terry Medina, who brought along a shovel to mark the momentous occasion, called the 200 Block a "20-year project" marked by controversy.

Once a series of attractive brick retail stores with a Spanish-language theater, restaurants and music stores, plans for the space have changed several times, with its

most recent reincarnation finalized Aug. 27 by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

Racquel Mariscal, who lived in Watsonville for 27 years and was heavily involved in the planning for the 200 Block project with Campos, said the original buildings were at one time plagued by violence and alcohol-related nuisances.

At the Friday festivities, Dianne Church, with the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce, said she first came to Watsonville after the earthquake in 1989, when the EDA made a commitment to help rebuild the city.

The EDA is now partnering with the city to build the civic center project, after supporting a parking lot on East Beach, the Cabrillo College extension and Plaza Vigil.

"We're all anxious to see what happens next," Church said.

Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Heather Morse remarked to the Watsonville audience before her about the "special sense of community we have here."

She said she hopes the civic center will be a means to equal access to justice for all, as well as a learning center for students and a community meeting place.

The new facility will include improved facilities for crime victims, enhanced prisoner holding cells and jury rooms.

"It's a huge steppingstone, establishing Watsonville as a partner to the county," District Attorney Bob Lee told the Register-Pajaronian last month.

Library director Deborah Barrow reminded the audience of Watsonville's long-standing commitment to the public library, which has long outgrown its current site.

"It is no surprise to me that the city of Watsonville would find a way to support community needs and its local library," Barrow said.

The new library will offer more computer facilities and children's rooms, and the California Agricultural Worker's History Center will honor the diverse ethnic and cultural groups of the Pajaro Valley.