

# Zuniga's reopening at airport

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WATSONVILLE — The "oldest Mexican restaurant in the Monterey Bay area" is reopening Thursday at the Watsonville Airport.

Zuniga's, known for its tamales, chile rellenos and salsa, has been closed since Dec. 31, when Santa Cruz owners Larry and Vicki Brindley filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy.

"I'm really excited about reopening," Larry Brindley said Tuesday before the city council approved a new five-year lease in closed session that included the Brindleys posting a \$100,000 bond.

Zuniga's will reopen at 11 a.m. Thursday for lunch.

Airport business owners such as Charlie King of Watsonville Aviation and Bill Cleverdon from United Flight Services are also looking forward to the reopening.

"Glad to hear it," responded King. "Not only are people going to be flying here again to eat and buy fuel, but he employs a lot of people." Added Cleverdon: "I've been here 30 years, and I've seen other restaurants come and go. The restaurant is important to the overall economic situation for the city, and you want movement of aircraft to bring in business."

Dining room manager Sally Locke-Paddon is thrilled to get the opportunity to return to her old job. "It will be like going back home again because it's like family," said Locke-Paddon, one of 30 former employees hired back. "I've been in the restaurant business for 20 years, and I've never seen such a close-knit group of people caring for each other, and in turn, caring for the people who dine there."

In addition to posting a \$100,000 bond, the Brindleys agreed to reimburse the city of Watsonville for \$6,000 in lost lease payments from



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## Larry and Vicki Brindley

Dec. 31 and to repay \$24,000 in debts to local vendors on a payment schedule.

After Zuniga's December closing, Airport Manager Don French was directed to work with a city council subcommittee to develop restaurant lessee criteria.

In January, 67 letters were sent to potential local lessees regarding the city-owned property, French said. Eighteen restaurateurs expressed interest, including the Brindleys.

A further questionnaire brought in seven responses, French added, and the subcommittee ranked the responses based on the following criteria: financial stability, restaurant experience, menu and presentation, liquor license experience, fair lease terms and remodel of the facility.

Of the seven, the Brindleys' proposal was most favorable, French said.

"The subcommittee members felt Larry and Vicki met all of the criteria. The only weak area was financial stability, and they agreed to guarantee a \$100,000 bond to as-

sure their stability."

Another advantage they had over other respondents was time. "They can move immediately and start up their business, while other proposals called for remodeling the kitchen to cater to their particular food preparation needs," French said.

Expanding and altering the menu will be the first order of business, Larry said. "We are going to emphasize an American menu to give customers more variety. That's what customers were saying before, and we're listening."

To complement his Mexican menu, Larry is planning daily steak, fish and salad specials. "We are also looking at, but not right away, of experimenting with a weekend brunch — Mexican and American-style — on Saturday and Sunday. Perhaps a buffet."

Larry Brindley is also planning to resume the wholesale salsa business venture with the Zuniga salsa label in 28 stores from Salinas to Boulder Creek. The restaurant will be open Monday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.