

Watsonville face-lift plan readied

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WATSONVILLE — As a plan to return downtown Watsonville's many historic buildings to their original splendor gets the finishing touches, Main Street merchants hope it is a prelude to resurrecting the city economy.

City leaders also hope to recapture a bustling downtown center by offering a weekly farmers market within the next two years. "Sunday in Watsonville," as it is being called, would be in the late afternoon on Peck Street next to the plaza and feature locally grown produce as well as food booths, entertainment and crafts.

This week, designs for a downtown face lift were unveiled to some 20 property owners and business people located in Main Street's historic buildings. About half have said they're interested in participating in a low-interest program being sponsored by Main Street Watsonville and administered by the city's Housing and Economic Development Department.

The facade improvement program is expected to be approved by the City Council on July 26.

Last year, local business leaders met with volunteer architecture students led by local architects and design experts who studied downtown buildings and prepared designs for some 40 downtown businesses, including Vans Shoes, Ace Hardware, El Pollero, La Manzana Center, Woolworth's, and the Lettunich, Kalich and Harris buildings.

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has been tarnished," said Jerry Hernandez, director of Main Street Watsonville.

In many cases, paint or intricate detail has worn away, ruined in the 1989 earthquake, or been changed. Architectural details in buildings of the 1910s and 1920s like transom windows — small-paned windows placed above street-level doors and windows to add light to tall buildings — were covered in later years with metal or wood.

"People will add on something to change the style of the building, thinking they're improving it or modernizing it," kind of like a 'grandmother in a mini-skirt,'" said Santa Cruz architect Hugh David Carter, one of four local architects who volunteered to oversee the project. "People would paint (buildings) over, paint them in or put an awning over them ... we're suggesting uncovering some of the hidden treasure that's there."

In the report, architects critiqued each building, like the one at 462 Main St. that houses Vans Shoes, Oliverius Cleaners and La

Perla del Pacifico restaurant. According to the report, it has "uninviting storefronts, each of a different design and undefined architectural style." The canopy hanging above the stores is "harsh and unattractive," and signs are "haphazard."

Improvements included in the plan range from simple repainting of a building or changes to signs and lighting to complete rebuilding of a building's facade. Most recommendations cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

Designs show how building facades can change with a multicolored paint job highlighting intricate molding, or be completely remodeled, like that of El Pollero restaurant on the corner of Main and Rodriguez streets, which designers say is an important "southern gateway" to the city.

With the Main Street program in place, two of the biggest obstacles to restoration of downtown buildings have been removed, Hernandez said.

Many property owners who

want to dress up their buildings do not know how to restore the building to its original design, or cannot afford such to pay for it.

To overcome that, the project will offer building owners loans of up to \$20,000 with 2 percent interest rate paid over five years. If the buildings are maintained, the interest will be returned when the debt is fully paid.

But El Pollero owner Isabel Garza said city loans won't help them come close to aesthetic renovations estimated at more than \$65,000.

"It looked real nice — I'm interested in making it bigger and better," said Garza, adding that the building owner has the final say.

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Improving the look of downtown and highlighting agriculture in a farmers market are two major ways city leaders plan to market Watsonville's downtown, Hernandez said, in addition to catering to the area's cultural diversity and artistic community.

Of the 78 local business who responded to a survey on a future farmers market, 72 percent said they favored the weekly event, said Hernandez.

"We know through research that Sunday is the strongest (shopping) day ... with this community in particular because of the farm workers," said Hernandez.

As a spin-off to the weekly market, a bigger, street fair would be held four times a year featuring cultural arts and crafts, entertainment and food.

"The city is really getting behind it ... with that involvement I think they're definitely going to have a success on their hands," said Jess Brown, executive director of the county Farm Bureau.