

SPRUCING UP



PHOTOS BY KAREN T. BORCHERS—MERCURY NEWS

A Los Gatos man gets a haircut from barber Rigo Navarro in a barbershop on Main Street in downtown Watsonville. City leaders are optimistic an economic turnaround can be achieved in the area, which is getting a face lift.

Watsonville - General 1990

Downtown on the rebound

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Watsonville leaders seek turnaround in business climate

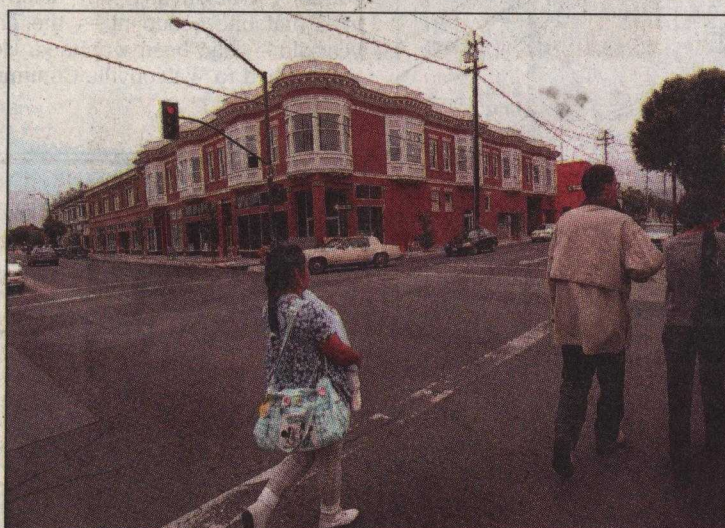
BY TERRI MORGAN
Special to the Mercury News

Watsonville's downtown is on the rebound, say city leaders working to reverse a decadelong economic slump. A multitude of projects, like the nearly complete restoration of four historic buildings and recent openings of new restaurants and businesses, including the Soccer Central indoor arena, are breathing life into the city's commercial core.

Nine years in the making, the city's revitalization campaign began showing results during the past two years.

"More has happened in the last two years than has happened in the previous 20," said Watsonville Mayor Dennis Osmer. "Some real progress is going on there now. Our challenge is to link the building development with business development."

The weekly Friday farmers market, which opened last month, and upcoming work to quadruple the size of the Watsonville cam-



Pedestrians cross the street near a newly remodeled building on the 500 block of Watsonville's Main Street.

pus of Cabrillo College are expected to draw more people to the economically ailing downtown district. Special events, like the recent Strawberry Festival, and promotional campaigns emphasize the city's strong points.

"We've got the entertainment component, the sports component, the retail component, the aesthetic component, the historic

component and the arts and cultural component," said Charles Eadie, Watsonville's development director. "Each is a piece of mosaic, which is going to make for a beautiful and interesting downtown."

The city's redevelopment agency and the non-profit Watsonville Main Street program are working with business owners to revitalize

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— Mayor Dennis Osmer

the downtown marketplace. A number of businesses are sprouting new signs, more in character with the city's century-old history, thanks to economic incentives and assistance arranged through the downtown Watsonville marketplace program. Several business owners are working to upgrade the rear facades and entries into their stores as the city prepares to convert alleys into pedestrian-friendly walkways to attract shoppers. A team of downtown ambassadors patrols the district on foot.

See DOWNTOWN, Page 2B

Watsonville seeks upswing for downtown

■ DOWNTOWN

from Page 1B

Along with providing a safe and attractive urban center, the city hopes to generate enough sales to reverse a nine-year economic decline. The downturn began with the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which caused widespread damage in Watsonville.

"The earthquake was part of a triple whammy that hit Watsonville," said Eadie. "The loss of the food-processing industry and the recession also hurt."

Eadie thinks Watsonville is on the upswing. So does Ramiro Romo, who is investing in its recovery. The owner of the popular Jalisco Restaurant in downtown Watsonville, Romo just opened El Altano restaurant in a new Spanish-style building a few blocks away on Main Street.

"I believe in Watsonville," Romo said. "Maybe business downtown will be better (with all the improvements)."

Gottschalks stays on

The city got another big boost in May when Gottschalks department store, which anchors the downtown district, decided to remain in Watsonville. Company executives had considered giving up their downtown Watsonville location, but changed their minds after Mayor Osmer and the city manager drove to Fresno to tell them how the recent and upcoming improvements would draw shoppers.

"We convinced them of the potential," Osmer said, adding that the city must now deliver on its promises. "Now's the time the rubber has to hit the road."

Unlike Gottschalks and Romo, not all business owners have embraced the redevelopment efforts, said Nancy Moore Wright, special project manager for the Watsonville Redevelopment Agency. Pointing out several storefronts on Main Street during a recent walking tour, Wright admits getting business owners to participate in the program has been challenging.

Even with the holdouts, the efforts are moving full-speed ahead.

Pedestrian access

The city aims pedestrian access, especially for families with young children. Work to convert alleys connecting parking lots to stores and the plaza will begin soon. Paseo Romo, which crosses the restaurant owner's property, will lead pedestrians from Stoesser's Alley to the plaza, and Stoesser's Alley will allow people to walk from the future Arts Center and Gallery to the Mello Center.

The city also plans to extend a pedestrian way from Saint Patrick's Church to Ramsay Park to connect the downtown district with the Target store now under construction at the Overlook Shopping Center. The paseos will provide alternatives to Main Street, the four-lane thoroughfare that serves as Highway 152.