

# Thoughts turn toward rebuilding

## Redevelopment board suggested

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WATSONVILLE — With the new year just around the corner, city officials and developers are putting serious thought into the future of downtown.

Suggestions for housing, a conference center and the resurrection of a redevelopment advisory board have been put forward.

The Oct. 17 earthquake severely damaged some 32 buildings downtown. All but one building on each of the 300 and 400 blocks were razed. Also, downtown landmarks such as the Masonic Temple and the Oddfellows Building were demolished as a result of damage from the temblor.

To help the newly elected City Council through the reconstruction process, Mayor Todd McFarren has suggested revitalizing the redevelopment agency advisory board.

A similar board was active in the late 1970s and early 1980s as Watsonville began its redevelopment project for lower Main Street. But the group's suggestions were largely ignored in favor of a plan fostered by City Manager John Radin to tear down the 200 block of Main Street and place a post office on most of the land.

The post office is an unpopular idea among some of the newly elected City Council members. Mayor McFarren and Councilman Parr Eves have criticized it as wasting too much land for a non-taxpaying entity.

That's one reason why McFarren wants the advisory board reconstituted.

"It played a good role before. Maybe it can be revived, and we can put together a downtown with the board's input and work with the Chamber of Commerce," McFarren said.

McFarren would like to see a conference center/county courthouse on the 200 block of Main Street.

His idea, still in the formative stages, calls for having a hall large enough to hold conferences, with meeting rooms surrounding it. The hall could be rented out to organizations.

Included in the complex would be a new county courthouse and health services agency for south county, both of which are located in county-owned buildings on Freedom Boulevard.

On the county land on Freedom Boulevard, McFarren would like to place low-income housing.

McFarren has just begun to pitch the idea to county officials, so it's too early to tell whether it will go anywhere. But, the new mayor says, any idea at this stage is worth looking at.

Another plan has emerged from John Fry of Construction/Development/Management Corp. for the 300 and 400 blocks of Main Street.

Working with real estate agent Tony Campos, Fry has designed a plan for constructing commercial and business space at ground level, with housing above it. The housing units would be studios and two-bedroom apartments for singles, seniors and childless couples, Campos said.

The plan has a lot of proponents, but not all the property owners who would need to endorse it have given their approval.

"We're trying to meet with the property owners, but we still haven't reached one, and that's Mort Console (former owner of Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food/Co)," Campos said.

Console owns 307 Main Street with a building that had to be demolished because of earthquake damage.

"We've broken the discussions into two groups. The 400 block and 300 block. It's easier to work with three to four people than 10 people," Campos said.

"We want to build the enthusiasm and have them working as a group, whether they like the Fry idea or not," Campos said. "The main thing is I want them to start thinking together as a group. Each going on their own will not be healthy for Watsonville."

"Together we can address parking, economics and rent for a reasonable rate," Campos said. "It's very important to get reasonable rents and for the project to carry itself economically."

Rents downtown have always been low, ranging from 50 cents to \$1.25 a

square foot. The low rents have supported many mom-and-pop businesses that can't afford higher-rent shopping centers.

No matter what happens with downtown, architect Richard Aland suggests the city move toward making downtown more pedestrian-oriented and warmer by innovative layout of the streets and the placement of the buildings.

Aland said the downtown should avoid having "canyons," an architectural term describing the effect two tall buildings have on a street. The tall buildings block out sunshine and create a cold feeling, he said.

"By stepping back the buildings, you can avoid the canyon problem," he said.

Even if a building is four or five stories tall, by stepping back each floor, the sunlight can reach the street level throughout most of the day, he said.

Aland also suggests the city create pedestrian street "spokes" using the City Plaza as the hub.

"The plaza is the center of town and it should be emphasized in the street layout," Aland said.

Aland is a strong supporter of having Town Hall meetings to discuss the future of downtown.

"The most important point is that the whole town needs to work on it," Aland said. "John Fry can participate, as well as anyone else. But deals should not be made behind closed doors."