

Watsonville council puts off decision on study of downtown

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

The Watsonville City Council, meeting yesterday as the Redevelopment Agency, asked an advisory committee to take a second look at four consultants' proposals for a \$65,000 downtown marketing study.

That will put the study itself on an even tighter deadline in order to qualify for funds — it must be finished by the end of January.

The study, which will be paid for by federal and state sources, is expected to answer a number of questions, including who shops downtown and why, who shops in outlying areas and why, and what would make people shop downtown more. It will also look at the feasibility of a *mercado*, or open-air market.

The city put out a request for proposals for the study Aug. 29. Members of a special committee had read through the four thick applications sent in reply, and interviewed two of the firms. They recommended San Francisco-based Keyser Marston Associates, which proposed to do the study for \$45,000, \$20,000 less than what is available to the city. The city could use the remaining money for related projects, Interim City Manager Chuck Comstock said last week. The committee said Keyser Marston had long experience in just this type of study.

cal idiosyncrasies and give us a cookbook study."

The committee that made the recommendation to the council was an offshoot of the informal advisory Downtown Recovery Committee. It included Planning Director Maureen Owens, former Watsonville City Councilman Rex Clark, Ford's Department Store Vice President Hal Hyde, and real estate broker Ralph Oliver.

Owens said that Keyser Marston was either the first or second choice of each person, based on the written proposal, and the first choice after the oral interview.

She said that in the interview, the firm filled in many details, including the ways to determine the feasibility of the *mercado*, and made clear its intent to make the shopper surveys bilingual.

Zephyr, she said, didn't follow important instructions from the city in putting together its proposal, which all members had perceived as an inattention to detail.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy argued that Keyser Marston had given the *mercado* concept weight by making it one of the four parts of its proposed study, and that other specific suggestions in the Zephyr proposal were too specific.

The group proposed, for instance, to hire an architect to sketch possible *mercado* designs. Murphy said including designs in a marketing study would be premature.

Councilman Oscar Rios objected from the beginning, however, saying he had read the stack of proposals and thought that Keyser Marston's was too general, particularly in addressing how it intended to study the feasibility of the *mercado*.

Several people, including Ray Vigil of Migrant Media and Pam Salsedo of El Pajaro Community Development Corporation, told the council that the focus of the study should be a *mercado*.

"The *mercado* could be the anchor we have been looking for downtown," Vigil said.

The consulting team that included the most detail in its written proposal about the *mercado* — Zephyr Associates — wasn't one of the two consulting teams interviewed.

There was another wrinkle in the debate. Several of the council members personally know one of the members of the Zephyr team, Bill Segal, an instructor of economics at UC-Berkeley who accompanied Rios to Irapuato, Mexico, on a fact-finding tour.

"I want to make sure we have the proper motives," Mayor Todd McFarren said. "I would hope that we wouldn't not hire someone just because he has been involved in the community and may have some perceived political bent."

McFarren joined Rios and Councilman Lowell Hurst in calling the Keyser Marsten proposal too general, saying that a "big city firm" might be very competent and slick, but also might "miss the lo-

"The *mercado* is one piece of downtown, and what we want to see (from the study) is what sells downtown, so that businesses up and down Main Street will know," she said. "We want to see what kind of businesses will endure, and why some things that have been tried haven't worked."

Murphy said she wanted to know, for instance, why La Manzanita Center hadn't become the *mercado*, but had pretty much been converted to a learning institution.

Planning Director Owens suggested that as a compromise, the council could hire Keyser Marston and require it to sub-contract with Segal for the section on the *mercado*. Segal, who was at the meeting last night, told the council that he wouldn't want to do that.

The council seemed at a loss for what to do. At one point, Murphy made a motion to hire Keyser Marston, but it died for lack of a second. At another point, Hurst moved to hire Zephyr based on its written proposal, and the motion was seconded by Rios. However, Hurst withdrew his motion after more discussion.

In the end, the council put the whole thing back in the lap of the Downtown Recovery Committee and asked it to interview in person all four of the consulting teams. Dick Bernard, co-chairman of the Downtown Recovery Committee, said that the first thing the group would do would be to form a new, possibly expanded subcommittee to make the recommendation.