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Rebuilding

Toward quake recovery

New markets for Watsonville

By Bob Johnson
Special to the Mercury News

Retail sales in downtown Watsonville are expected to rebound as buildings go up and shoppers return to the area, consultants have told the city council.

A San Francisco consulting firm concluded that the key to downtown vitality is attracting customers from nearby areas despite competition from newer suburban shopping centers on the outskirts of Watsonville.

"Will retail sales in Watsonville recover rapidly from the effects of the earthquake?" asked Keyser Marston Associates in a recent report. "In our opinion, yes."

The scheduled return of Ford's Department Store to its Main Street flagship location this October should solidify the rebirth of the downtown, according to Keyser Marston.

Mexican market

The firm also endorsed an attempt to blend commerce and culture in a proposed retail development that would accentuate Watsonville's ethnic diversity. Community and business activists are hoping to see a Mexican-style market of vendor stalls, or *mercado*, catering to the overwhelmingly Hispanic residents of the neighborhood.

"A *mercado* can make an important contribution in revitalizing the downtown area," economist Bill Segal wrote in a recent report to the Watsonville City Council. "A *mercado* can be successful and can serve as a demonstration project encouraging developers and lenders to proceed with other development."

Segal concluded in his study that the downtown could support at least one 9,000-square-foot *mercado* with six stalls, and possibly two *mercados*. He recommended a vacant lot where the Odd Fellows building once stood as the best site. One *mercado* plan estimates the cost at \$1.9 million.

Delays on Main Street

While nearly a dozen major new construction or rehabilitation proposals are moving forward, the one piece of the new downtown that is stalled is a planned retail center on Main Street across from City Hall. Some city officials are growing anxious about the delays.

"At what point do we make a decision that this is not going to happen?" Mayor Todd McFarren asked before the council voted to have a city official meet with the developer.