

Watsonville to develop *mercado*

By Bob Johnson
Special to the Mercury News

An eclectic collection of Watsonville business people and community activists is closely watching an experiment in commerce and culture being planned for a narrow strip of weed-infested land in the old downtown.

City planners are reviewing drawings for up to a dozen permanent small stalls, separated by landscaped patio areas, that would be built on a vacant lot roughly 10 feet deep extending 200 feet along Union Street, a block north of the Main Street Plaza.

For property owner Bill Codiga, the modest project would bring life to a previ-

“We’re talking about perhaps 25 jobs within that facility.”

— Pam Salsedo, El Pajaro Community Development Corp.

ously useless strip of land that was created by a street realignment a decade ago.

And for a group of people meeting regularly to bring a Mexican-style *mercado* to Watsonville, Codiga’s development would be a test case of their hope that an open-air mixture of the commercial and the cultural could be pivotal in resurrecting the downtown from the devastation of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

“If it were just six small businesses,

we’re talking about perhaps 25 jobs within that facility,” said Pam Salsedo, executive director of El Pajaro Community Development Corp.

“If it turned out we could develop a whole block, a half-block, or a series of smaller *mercados*, then the number of jobs would be larger.”

Salsedo has already applied for federal grants to provide rent subsidies and technical assistance to fledgling businesses

that would take root in the *mercados*, and she is working on state and foundation grant proposals.

But Salsedo confesses that the painstaking process of bringing together land, money and people is far more time-consuming than anyone envisioned.

“Right after the earthquake we thought everything was going to happen in a year,”

See MERCADO, Page 2B

Leaders hope experiment will revitalize downtown

MERCADO, from Page 1B

she said. “But something of this sort is going to take two years.”

The modest row of stalls planned for the vacant lot has assumed greater significance because it would offer a relatively early test of the *mercado* concept in downtown Watsonville.

Architect Bob Corbett said a decision could be made by the city within a month, and construction of the stucco stalls and wooden roof could be completed as soon as two months after the permits are issued.

“This will give us a chance to observe the market on a mini scale. We’ll see how it goes; see how it fits consumer demand,” said Dick Bernard, co-chairman of the Downtown Recovery Committee that was convened by the Chamber of Commerce after the earthquake.

Creating a *mercado* also is a new role for the Migrant Media Education Project, a Watsonville agency that has earned a reputa-

tion as an uncompromising advocate for the town’s lowest-income Hispanic workers.

The agency has organized a series of protests against alleged abuses by immigration agents. Its founding director, Cruz Gomez, battled the city for four years to win historic federal voting rights that forced Watsonville to adopt district elections.

Under new director Ray Vigil, who took the post early this summer, Migrant Media has encouraged community activists and Chamber of Commerce representatives alike to join the weekly planning sessions for the *mercado*.

“We see ourselves as a catalyst to set our community much tighter together,” said Vigil, acknowledging that he has expanded Migrant Media’s mission.

But, he said, “We are still an agency that advocates for the migrant population — we will always be.”