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Mandatory prevailing wage OK'd

By Bob Johnson

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The Watsonville City Council has unanimously approved a requirement that the prevailing wage be paid to workers on building projects that get financial support from the city.

The new law figures to be a boon to construction unions in the rebuilding of earthquake-damaged downtown Watsonville, because many of the proposed projects will receive the minimum \$100,000 in city funds that makes prevailing wages a requirement.

The Watsonville law for the downtown redevelopment area is patterned after a similar requirement adopted two months ago by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors for projects in the Live Oak-Soquel redevelopment area.

"I have no problem with passing a policy on prevailing wages — to me it's just an extension of city policy on public buildings," said Councilwoman Betty Murphy during the public hearing Tuesday.

The policy was proposed by the Solidarity Committee of Santa Cruz County and got the support of construction unions, local non-profit community groups and the two largest contractors in town.

"I am one of the nearly 400 laid-off Green Giant workers and I ask you to support the prevailing wage policy," said Lauro Navarro from the Trabajadores Desplazados, the organization of workers laid off from Green Giant. "I am married, I have five children, and I am going through a training program for carpentry. I am hoping to earn a wage that is sufficient to support my family."

The only dissent during the hearing came from a representative of a Salinas-based non-profit housing corporation that is planning to build an affordable family apartment complex on Watsonville's lower Main Street.

"As a former union member I applaud the efforts of the Solidarity Committee," said Hector Bur-

gos, a senior development specialist for CHISPA, the Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association, a housing agency whose acronym in Spanish means "spark."

"But unfortunately I am here tonight representing the only non-profit agency currently proposing to build a 42-unit affordable family housing project downtown. Our budget is pretty thin — it's a budget that has no room for any increase."

City Manager Steve Salomon had recommended that the city allow numerous exemptions, including the CHISPA project, in adopting the new law.

But the council accepted the request of Solidarity Committee representative Mardi Wormhoudt, an ex-mayor of Santa Cruz, that only projects that already have final financial agreements with the redevelopment agency be exempted.

Final adoption of the law is expected later this month.