

# Watsonville Square gets green light for expansion

By DAN YOUNG

Opponents called it a "threat to the community." Proponents said it was a "step forward" for the city and the "completion of a vision."

Whatever, it appears a proposed expansion of the Watsonville Square shopping center will be allowed to proceed.

The City Council Tuesday night reversed an earlier decision by the Planning Commission, and, on a 4-1 vote (Mayor Ann Soldo and Councilman Roy Ingersoll were absent),

approved a change in the city's General Plan to allow for a 15,000-square-foot expansion of the shopping center.

Although the public hearing lasted the better part of an hour, the council took little time in making a decision.

The public hearing was closed at 10:09 p.m. by Acting Mayor Vido Deretich, and at 10:10 Councilman Frank Osmer moved to approve the appeal of the Planning Commission's decision. It was approved at 10:11.

Only Councilwoman Betty Murphy opposed the reversal.

"I honestly can't see...how

we can say 'therefore, we are serving the public good,' by approving a change in the General Plan," she said. "This is not in the best interest of the community."

Under state law, a change in a city's General Plan must be made "in the best interest of the community."

Bill Shelton, director of the El Pajaro Community Development Corporation, agreed with Mrs. Murphy.

Saying he was speaking for several of the downtown merchants, Shelton argued that the land on which the expansion is to take place is susceptible to slides, the traffic generated by the additional stores will add to an already unacceptable situation, and "a vote for the project would violate the trust," of the city's planning process.

"At the time of the development (of the center), we were told that this was to be a convenience center," he said.

The council elicited a pledge from the developers that they would never expand," he added.

But Shelton hit more squarely on the reason for opposition to the expansion when, while challenging the council to make the "correct" decision, he said if the council was serious about downtown revitalization, "why approve this project?"

Proponents of downtown revitalization are a bit jealous, Ken Miller, owner of Johnson Drug, explained.

"There wouldn't be so much opposition (to the expansion) if we had some movement (from the council) on downtown redevelopment," Miller said.

He also congratulated the shopping center retailers on the way they handled themselves during the sometimes heated debates over the expansion — at the same time chastizing his fellow downtown merchants a bit.

"If members of the downtown attended meetings as well as

the shopping center people...downtown redevelopment would have been long past where it is."

He then invited the shopping center merchants to back up their words with action — they had earlier said they were "all for" downtown revitalization — by attending next week's Redevelopment Agency meeting.

Shopping center owners Doug Kaplan and Russ Matesso argued successfully that the proposed addition to the center would "close off" the southern end of the complex, which in turn would be a "step forward for the city and the downtown area."

They said the completed center would be "an attractive" addition to the city, and draw more customers from outlying areas to the city — and the downtown area.

Kaplan and Matesso must now go back before the Planning Commission to have the parcel of land on which the expansion is to take place rezoned from public/quasi-public to commercial.