



Kurt Ellison

Dahlia Torres waits for customers with son Anthony in Bake-Rite coffee shop, which will move from Ford's parking lot location to the new Ford's department store when it opens.

## Refurbished downtown poses worrisome problem: high rents

Sonja Escalante's dilemma is the same one faced by many other downtown Watsonville shopkeepers: the spiffed-up downtown can mean spiffed-up rents, too.

Escalante had a thriving bridal boutique, Touch of Elegance, in the Jefsen building next to the Miramar Grill on Main Street. She paid 9 cents a square foot for 10,000 feet, and employed five other people.

Now she's seeing rents of at least \$1 a square foot and says she must have at least 3,000 square feet for her inventory — long gowns — and large dressing rooms.

"I'm going someplace, even if I have to pitch a tent," Escalante said. But the changes have been painful.

Inspectors decided a few days after the earthquake that the Jefsen building was unsafe to enter. Given 20 minutes to remove her inventory, Escalante and about two-dozen volunteers hauled the silky goods into the parking lot, where, she remembers, it was beginning to rain.

Jane Hall, owner of the former

Register-Pajaronian building on East Lake Avenue, offered her space for the dresses. Soon thereafter, the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce brought in modulars to house the displaced businesses, and she moved into one. That brought about her first increase — from the \$900 she had been paying to \$1,300. Debt built up, but she managed to keep going and employ three people.

Now, just as business was beginning to pick up for the first time since the earthquake — customers said they were just finding the shop again and the debt was being pared down — Escalante must move — again. Although such a move was planned for December anyway, Ford's department store needs its parking lot back sooner, and the chamber has agreed to remove the modulars.

She had been counting on the December move, Escalante said, because that's the slow season for her anyway. There would be time to let customers know where she was before wedding-dress-buying started up again.

Escalante said there are plenty of vacancies in Watsonville, but the rents she has seen, once as-

sociation fees are added in, are well over \$1 a square foot. That means rents of up to \$5,000 a month for the minimum size she needs.

Escalante said she long ago gave up on getting help from FEMA, having found the red tape exhausting at the same time she was trying to run the business.

"We're not over the hill yet," she said.

The trend is not likely to turn around, as many downtown property owners have had to incur large loans to rebuild, repair and repaint.

Other retail tenants of the modular units have had varying luck. A few have slipped quietly out of business, or moved to other areas.

Of those located in the same cluster as Touch of Elegance, Freddy's Fast Foto moved some time ago to Salinas; Watsonville Vacuum and Sewing has found a new location at Freedom Boulevard and Eastern Drive; Unique Hair has its eye on a vacant Main Street storefront; and the Bake-Rite Bakery coffee shop will move into Ford's.

—Susanna Heckman