

Earthquake - 1989 - Watsonville - Rebuilding

Watsonville makeover proposed

Shopping district, civic center anchor plan

By JAMIE MARKS
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WATSONVILLE — A bold scheme for revitalizing the earthquake-scarred downtown by creating an integrated shopping district and regional civic center drew raves as it was unveiled Friday by the Urban Land Institute.

The ULI plan struck a common chord in the audience, knitting together the desires of disparate community groups with a plan which was both responsive to the Latino community and a center for civic activities.

Among the plan's highlights are an open-air mercado near the City Plaza, a new County Courthouse and Health Services Agency next to the planned Post Office on the 200

block of Main Street, a community hall with a youth center in what was once the Oddfellows building, and low-income housing around the downtown core.

"It's the beginning of a new, bold and hopefully successful Watsonville ... with enduring values for future generations," said Bud Lake, moderator of the ULI panel.

The ULI panel also recommended preserving what's left of downtown, especially the Fox Theatre, Jefsen Hotel, Porter Building and Lettunich Building. They are part of the city's heritage and should not be destroyed, the panel said.

Mayor Todd McFarren said he was "excited and enthusiastic" about the plan. The mayor said he got choked up when the panel unveiled sketches of the new down-

town.

ULI is a non-profit planning and education organization based in Washington, D.C. The panel of seven experts assembled in Watsonville included land-use specialists, developers, architects and market planners. They spent five days studying the downtown, interviewing community leaders and working up a design scheme that touched every block from the vacant 100 block of Main Street to St. Patrick's Church at the 700 block of Main Street.

Robert Gardner, a Beverly Hills market planner, suggested downtown needs to appeal to the growing economic power of the large Latino community — even though, the panel said, Watsonville is on

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An open-air mercado is one of many ideas under consideration.

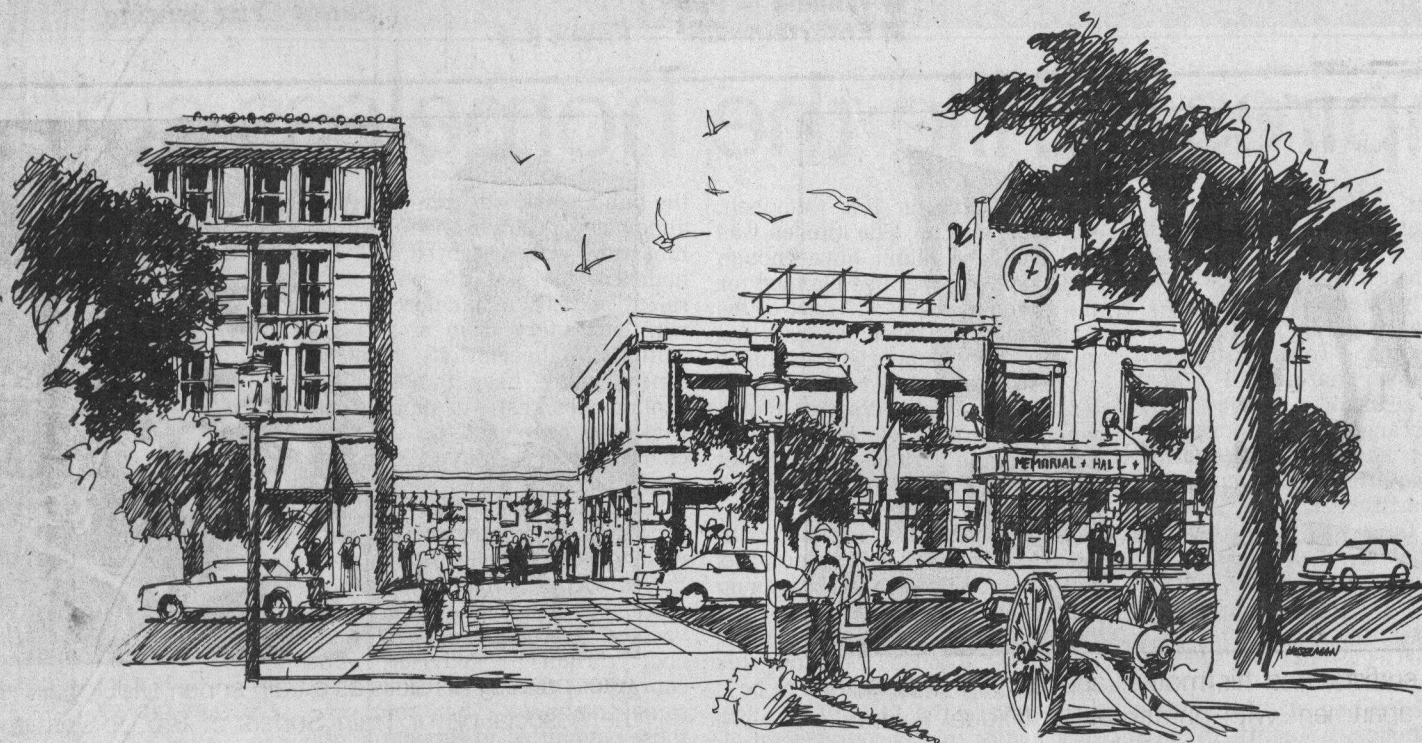
Downtown plan gets high marks

WATSONVILLE — Enthusiastic applause greeted the panel of the Urban Land Institute Friday as the members explained their plan for downtown recovery.

Following a week of study, the planning experts of the non-profit ULI recapped their conceptual plan for downtown for a captivated audience.

Mayor Todd McFarren said the plan incorporated all his dreams for the downtown, from a county courthouse to an open-air mercado

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Planners offered this view of East Beach Street, looking at what used to be the IOOF building. On the left is the Lettunich Building.

Plans/ Watsonville changes envisioned

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the verge of becoming a bedroom community for commuters.

The panel members said they thought agricultural employment has peaked. The trends indicate more people from the Santa Clara Valley are discovering that Watsonville is within their commuting range, the panel said.

In the short-term, Gardner said, the downtown can add 50,000 to 100,000 square feet of retail space beyond what's available now, with a primary focus on the Latino market.

An open-air mercado should be established immediately on Peck Street, next to the City Plaza. It could be moved later to the new development in the 300 block of Main Street, the panel said.

A key in the revitalization of downtown is Ford's Department store, the anchor store of downtown, which was destroyed in the earthquake.

"It appeals to all segments of the community," Gardner said. "Without Ford's the people who would normally come downtown will no longer come."

There's nearly enough office space already, but 5,000 square feet could be added annually downtown, he said.

"If one goal of a downtown is to enhance civic life, then the 200 block is an opportunity to do that — to create a civic core," said Linda Niebanck, a Santa Cruz-based planner with ULI.

A regional civic center could be created by relocating the County Courthouse and Health Services

Agency on Freedom Boulevard to the 200 block, which is the site of Watsonville's redevelopment project.

It would require altering the plans for the retail center proposed by San Jose developer Barry Swenson, but Niebanck said the issue should be explored.

The new Post Office should be built in the 200 block, but that leaves the question of what to do with the old building, Niebanck said. She suggested the Mediterranean-style two-story structure could become Cabrillo College's satellite campus, and an art and cultural center.

The vacant site of the Oddfellows Building was suggested as a multi-use community hall with a youth center. "Many people spoke ardently of the need to serve youth," Niebanck said. "In a multi-use hall, there ought to be dedicated space for youth."

Throughout ULI's plan, the City Plaza was cited as the focal point for the rest of downtown.

Broader sidewalks, accomplished by setting back the new buildings that will be built and adding two rows of trees, should be encouraged as a way to promote pedestrian traffic.

The ULI panel suggested the city forego attempts to move state Highway 152 off Main Street to Rodriguez Street. The panel said it would be expensive, time-consuming and disrupt an established residential neighborhood.

Niebanck said 350 to 500 units of low-income housing could be built in the downtown area.

The majority of housing should

ULI: form commission to guide rebuilding

WATSONVILLE — Who should guide the rebuilding after the earthquake?

The Urban Land Institute, a non-profit planning group, says it ought to be a newly established Community Development Commission.

The five-member CDC should be appointed by the City Council and drawn from the Downtown Recovery Committee, which has already begun the work of planning a new downtown, the ULI panel said.

The commission would have the power to advise the City Council on redevelopment issues, although policy-making for

redevelopment would be retained by the council. The commission would also consolidate funding, economic development activities and downtown planning under its purview.

The commission should have its own executive director who reports directly to the City Council and who is separate from the city manager, the ULI said.

The CDC would establish the goals for downtown recovery and a timetable for meeting those targets. It would also be a "sounding board" for the community, ULI's John Buchanan said. "You need a CDC."

be built in the 100 block of Main Street, which has been vacant since the late 1960s. The panel said it should be family housing, three stories tall, with the first floor devoted to parking to raise the living quarters above the flood plain.

Only 25 to 37 new units of housing ought to be planned above the new retail area, the panel said. As many as 300 new housing units could be built in the industrial west side, which borders downtown.

Parking should be easily located, convenient and free. Good parking makes people feel their downtown

is safe, the ULI panel said.

Financing will be a key component of the success of the downtown project.

John Buchanan, an expert in private/public partnerships, said the city should impose a \$50-a-year, five-year "parcel tax" throughout the city to raise money for downtown projects.

Also, the city ought to change its conservative fiscal policy of pay as you go. In order to re-establish a bold new downtown, the city will have to go into debt, Buchanan said.

Marks/ Concerns voiced about parking

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and a youth center.

He also liked the idea of an independent agency — the Community Development Commission — guiding rebuilding and economic development efforts.

"When I saw the pictures, my heart went into my throat and I got choked up," the mayor said.

"I'm real excited about it," said Planning Director Maureen Owens. "The panel captured our spirit and produced an excellent document. It's made my job a little easier because I believe the entire community can buy into the plan."

City Councilman Oscar Rios said he thought the plan was "really good — inspiring even. They really took into consideration the Latino

perspective."

Rios particularly liked the mix of land uses and cultural highlights, such as the open-air mercado, the cultural center and the low-income housing.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy said it was "great. We are in the process of doing some of these things already, and it gives me the sense of confidence we're headed in the right direction."

Murphy said she didn't know if there would be enough space or parking to accommodate the County Courthouse and Health Services Agency on the 200 block of Main Street, but she thought it was worth looking into the proposal.

City Manager John Radin sounded the only negative note. He

said there was no way the courthouse and Health Services Agency could be brought downtown because there isn't enough parking or space.

Len West, of PG&E and co-chairman of the Downtown Recovery Committee which contacted the ULI, said listening to the two-hour presentation was "sort of like being in a dream unfolding before you."

"I don't think we could do much better than this. There's something for every member of the community," West said.

Fourth District Supervisor Sherry Mehl said it was an exciting plan, but she was concerned about putting it into action.

"It will take a lot of coordinated effort, serious negotiations with the

property owners and the county to pull off," Mehl said.

Lisa Bullen, property manager for San Jose developer Barry Swenson, said she didn't think the 200 block site was large enough for a courthouse. But, she added, "We're open to everything."

Robert Corbett, an architect working with the property owners of the 300 block of Main Street, said he was sure his clients would be amenable to the suggestion about setting back the buildings to make a larger sidewalk.

"There are some (land) use decisions that have to be made by the property owners," he said, adding he thought the owners would be receptive to many of the ideas.

— Jamie Marks