

Main Street Watsonville

earns distinction

New book features successes

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WATSONVILLE — Main Street Watsonville, the local organization dedicated to the renovation and preservation of downtown, is highlighted in a new book, "Main Street Success Stories."

The book, published by the National Main Street Center, catalogues the successful revival of 44 downtown districts from around the nation. Only two other downtown districts in California, Berkeley and Eureka, were selected for the book.

"The communities included in Main Street Success Stories are communities which have gone the extra miles in developing a clear vision of their future, then rolling up their collective shirtsleeves to get down to the hard work of revitalization," said Kennedy Lawson Smith, director of the National Main Street Center.

On a meager \$120,000 annual budget, Main Street Watsonville has done some amazing things. The group of local business leaders, preservationists and city planners came together in 1992 to rebuild the town after the 1989 earthquake. These are some of their successes:

- Sponsored design planning: Design professionals, planning staff and volunteers came together to devise a physical recovery plan for the downtown.
- Positioning downtown to take advantage of the Latino market: Recognizing the \$1.7 billion tri-county buying power of the Latino population, Main Street devised a plan to create a center of Latino culture, arts and commerce in the heart of town.
- Hosted festivals: Celebrating a stable of the local economy, the annual Strawberry Dessert Festival draws the community and visitors to the historic downtown to enjoy an ethnic array of food, performing

artists, and strawberry desserts. They also hold a weekly Farmers' Market displaying fresh produce and novelties.

- Cleaned up downtown's image: On several occasions, volunteers have come out at 2 a.m. to pick up

trash, clean sidewalks, wash windows, weed and landscape.

Theo Wierdsma, president of Main Street Watsonville and manager of Gottschalks, said it is the individual voices of the community and businesses that have come together to make a difference.

"Main Street Watsonville played a crucial role in putting this together," he said peering across the downtown from the top of the Gottschalks building.

Gerry Hernandez, who has

been Main Street Watsonville's executive director from the start, said he was very proud that Watsonville was in the national spotlight. "It's because of a comprehensive program that targets improvement in

the downtown," he says.

The group applies four principles to downtown rejuvenation: design, organization, promotions and economic restructuring.

And since the group began, Hernandez said he has taken calls from big-city officials across the nation who are interested in what Watsonville is doing. Some calls have come from Oakland, Los Angeles, Chicago, Portland and San Francisco's Mission District.

Next Tuesday, Main Street Watsonville will meet with city officials to discuss a new project that will take renovation into the next phase. It's called the Downtown Implementation Plan, and it offers new standards of excellence for businesses and arts centers around town. The group would like to see a "cultural corridor" of art and entertainment shroud the center of town.

And while the downtown isn't perfect, it's pointed in the right direction and well on the road to recovery, Hernandez says. He points to the rise in the average rent for building space in the area. Since 1992, it's gone from 52 cents per square foot to 86 cents per square foot today.

Progress is a long-term strategy, Hernandez says. "It happens incrementally — one building block at a time."



Theo Wierdsma, president of Main Street Watsonville and manager of Gottschalks, takes delight in an aerial view of downtown Watsonville, which has gained national attention for its inclusion in a new book, "Main Street Success Stories."

Tarmo Hannula