

# Watsonville urged to go slowly as it rebuilds its downtown

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WATSONVILLE — While business in downtown Watsonville has already begun to rebound, the city should not rush into revitalization, including the development of a Latino-oriented shopping district.

That was the advice to the city from two consultants Tuesday night, who presented their \$65,000 downtown retail and marketing/mercado feasibility studies.

In both instances, consultants Mike Conlon and Bill Segal stressed that the city needs to "walk before it runs" to revitalize Watsonville's downtown.

Council members, sitting as the Watsonville Redevelopment Agency, were impressed with the two studies. The main one, pertaining to downtown retail and marketing, concluded that downtown Watsonville business is doing "surprisingly well" despite the October 1989 earthquake.

The earthquake resulted in the loss of 239,900 square feet of downtown retail space, according to consultant Conlon. However, Watsonville's retail sales in the first quarter of 1990 were almost exactly the same as before the earthquake in the first quarter of 1989, indicating that residents did not abandon Watsonville, instead shopping in the Green Valley Road and Freedom Boulevard areas.

Council members took the good news

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by unanimously voting to circulate the two studies to various Watsonville business organizations for input. The studies would then return to the city for possible action.

Conlon maintained downtown Watsonville could use more "variety," calling for more general merchandise, apparel, restaurants, home furnishings and specialty retail establishments. He also cited the need for small leaseable space for small businesses. He said that 91,000 square feet of new retail space would be supportable downtown.

At the same time, consultant Segal said a \$1.8-million, 9,000-square-foot, Latino-oriented shopping district — or mercado-like farmer's market — would be an important contribution in revitalizing downtown. He recommended the

Odd Fellows' site at Union and Each Beach streets, across from the Town Plaza.

Segal estimated development costs of a mercado at \$1.8 million, of which \$1.2 million should be subsidized by the city. Such a subsidy would need to heavily rely on tax-increment financing from the city's Redevelopment Agency, he said.

Conlon also called for a large super-market downtown to cater to Latinos, as well as a minimum of three hours of free parking in city lots and public streets. The supermarket would compete against Lucky and Nob Hill grocery stores, while free parking would make downtown more competitive with outlying shopping centers.

"Anything within a stone's throw of (the soon-to-be rebuilt) Ford's department store and the Town Plaza, is where you should put your money in," Conlon told council members.

A large, Latino-oriented supermarket would prevent downtown residents, who are 90 percent Latino, from shopping elsewhere and bypassing downtown, he added.

Councilman Oscar Rios, the only Latino on the council, called for the city to be "creative and meet the challenges cited in the studies.

"I just don't want to see this report put on a shelf," he said. "We have to ask ourselves, 'Can this be feasible?' I like to think it is."