

VCF CABRILLO 1990- R/P P.1

JAN 13 1993

Cabrillo eyes old post office as campus

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Cabrillo College is considering leasing the old post office building in Watsonville as the first step in establishing a permanent satellite campus in the downtown area that could serve about 2,000 students.

Cabrillo President John Hurd said college representatives are seriously considering the two-story building as the next site for the school's Watsonville Center, Cabrillo's off-campus facility.

Cabrillo currently rents space at La Manzana shopping center where it has three classrooms, a computer laboratory and two administrative offices. But that lease

will expire in July, Hurd said, and the college needs to either renew that lease or find another location.

Last semester, the Watsonville Center had about 900 students, most of whom were enrolled part-time. These students complained of cramped classrooms and inadequate parking at the center.

With a larger facility, Cabrillo could offer more classes and student services. Increasing student enrollment at its Watsonville site is pivotal to opening the door to getting state funding to build a permanent satellite campus in Watsonville, Hurd said.

The state requires community colleges to have a minimum of 500

full-time students attending an off-campus facility in order for those colleges to qualify for school-construction funds. Hurd said that if a larger site is selected, the focus would be to increase student enrollment at that site. The new site would need to have an enrollment of between 1,200 and 1,500 students. That would be the equivalent of 500 full-time students, as far as the state is concerned, Hurd said.

The old post office building, which became vacant in 1991 after the new post office opened on Main Street, was purchased by the city for about \$425,000, said Steve Salomon, Watsonville city man-

ager. The building, at Union and Trafton streets, has about 11,000-square-feet of space. There is a public library across from Trafton Street and the Watsonville Plaza is directly across from Union Street. The city's newly constructed multilevel parking garage is about two blocks away from the old post office.

The location, Hurd said, is ideal for a satellite campus, and a larger facility would also provide better access to a college education for many South County residents who may find commuting to the school's main campus in Aptos difficult.

See CAMPUS / back of section ▶

VCF CABRILLO 1990-

10 - Register-Pajaronian Wednesday, January 13, 1993

CAMPUS

▶ From Page 1

"It's extremely important to (Cabrillo) to provide full access," Hurd said. He added that other locations are being considered, but the old post office building is a strong candidate.

Cabrillo expects to make a decision soon on whether it will renew its lease at La Manzana or find another site. If it plans to move out of La Manzana, the decision would have to come before the lease runs out, Hurd said. That way Cabrillo would have enough time to make necessary modifications before opening for classes.

The city had hoped to get a restaurant to move into the old post office building, but so far there have been no takers, Salomon said. Having the Watsonville Center move into the building could provide a boost to the downtown economy, he said.

Salomon said city officials and Cabrillo representatives are working very closely to come up with a site that would benefit both the city and the college. The old post

office is high on the list.

"I am very optimistic that (Cabrillo) will stay in the downtown area on an interim basis, as well as on a permanent basis," Salomon said.

City officials have informed Cabrillo that it could provide up to \$2 million in state redevelopment funds to the school in its effort to find a permanent site in the downtown area. Cabrillo's master plan, which was adopted about a year ago, calls for a permanent site in Watsonville that would accommodate about 2,000 students.

The master plan estimates that the school's enrollment could reach 23,000 by the year 2006. In order to accommodate those students, Cabrillo would need a satellite campus in South County, where many of the new students would be coming from.

In the last two or three years, Cabrillo has focused on outreach efforts in South County, strengthening its relationship with high schools in the Pajaro Valley school district, providing bilingual educational programs at the Watsonville Center and appointing a bilingual-bicultural director for the Center.