

## Playing Post Office with Neighborhood Businesses

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Watsonville's city hall and police station overlook the rubble-strewn 200 block.

Bob Johnson

As a monument to their efforts to revitalize downtown, Watsonville city leaders can point across Main Street from city hall to a weed-infested vacant lot more than twice as large as a football field. For decades this land was home to the Daylite Market, whose patrons generally came via passing by the Rodriguez Street laundromat, walking through the parking lot and entering the back door that faced the Westside ethnic neighborhood.

The vacant land a few doors down from the now-defunct Daylite Market and laundromat was the site of the Philippines Gardens, where Pajaro Valley field workers came, also for decades, at the end of the working day to share beers, cards and small talk. Stand on the Southwest corner of the vacant lot and you can imagine the smell of the fish that Anthony Giammanco, following after his father Phillip, brought early every morning from the Monterey wharf to Watsonville's Japanese, Filipino and Mexican neighborhood.

The Daylite Market, Philippines Gardens, Anthony's Fish Market and other local stores had to leave Main Street's 200 block because the old neighborhood had contracted a case of blight. Most of the buildings were old and many showed it; a handful of them were vacant; and there was a crime problem embarrassingly centered a few hundred feet from the headquarters of Watsonville's finest.

The 200 block was chosen, over the strenuous objections of the neighborhood, to begin a redevelopment project that would sweep through other, similarly blighted stretches of South Main Street. When the U.S. Postal Service agreed to build a new post office on the 200 block, city leaders jumped at the opportunity—using the power of eminent domain to force the longtime owners to sell their properties, razing the blighted ethnic businesses and turning over to the postal service two football fields suitable for construction.

The vacant lot will mark its first birthday in a few weeks but don't look for any civic celebrations. The postal service has been painstakingly, and

predictably, slow in moving toward construction of its new facility. The would-be catalysts of downtown rebirth have even had enough trouble keeping up their vacant lot that the Watsonville City Council decided in September to dispatch a crew across the street to pull the weeds and send the bill to the postal service.

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And now the city hears that the postal service is running short on cash, is postponing indefinitely construction of its new building and is setting the stage for future birthdays at the old vacant lot.

"If they don't build on it this year, they might build on it next year... or two years from now. Who knows?" said City Manager John Radin, who is among the leading architects of the plan to use a new post office to ignite a rebirth downtown. "I don't think the regional officials will know until they get word from Washington."

The possibility that the postal service may never build its new facility—and that the centerpiece of the new downtown Watsonville will be a weed-infested vacant lot—is not a

possibility that city leaders are eager to consider. "It's their site," said Radin. "They own it; they paid for it. There's not much the city can do."

When a lively neighborhood marketplace is leveled—and replaced by a vast expanse of downtown dirt—it is a sign that something has gone wrong in the vision of the future. The neighborhood, and the longtime local businesspeople who made most of their sales to friends, could have been drawn upon as a resource in rebuilding Watsonville. The city decided instead to spurn the neighborhood and look for reliable friendship in the bureaucracy of the U.S. Postal Service.

Most of the businesspeople who were moved out to make room for the vacant lot were doing healthy sales from their locations in the belly of the blight. Anthony Giammanco didn't know that the area was depressed; he was ready to invest in a new walk-in refrigerator before the city razed his fish market. The La Colmena market and takeout foodstore next door to Anthony's has since relocated in a larger building on Lake Street in the industrial district. Dick Wong, from the family that started the Daylite during the depression, has submitted plans to build an 8,700-square-foot commercial center, anchored by a new market, a few hundred feet from the postal service's vacant lot. And 75-year-old Rose Tabasa has reopened the Philippines Gardens on Beach Street, where the old place continues to be better at making friends than making money.

Many of the people on this blighted block were prepared to expand or improve their businesses. They made a concerted effort to convince the city to put its redevelopment funds into public beautification that would enhance their own private efforts to improve the downtown. Because their pleas were turned down—and the city chose demolition over beautification—the creative efforts of the neighborhood businesspeople have been forced to the outskirts of the revitalization zone, which has come to resemble Dresden after the Allied bombers left.

It would be easy from the northern end of the county to engage in Santa Cruz smuggerly about the Watsonville yokels who turned deaf ears to the ethnic neighborhood and came away with a lot full of weeds to show for their wisdom. It would be well to remember, however, that the longtime local businesses that once occupied Santa Cruz's Pacific Avenue have long since been forced out to make room for hipper shops offering the latest lifestyle change to soothe the restless yuppie mind. And while Watsonville can become anxious when the ethnic neighborhood creeps to within a few feet of city hall, Santa Cruz's resident Hispanics are largely confined to Beach Flats, two bridges from the center of town.