



Fifteen new businesses have established themselves in the Plaza Vigil "business incubator" building at Beach and Union Streets. Tarmo Hannula

Plaza Vigil businesses growing steadily

WATSONVILLE — Plaza Vigil, the downtown "business incubator," marked its first anniversary over the Memorial Day weekend with all of its retail space and most of its office space rented.

Susan Olson, executive director of El Pajaro CDC, which runs Plaza Vigil, said that only a year ago only six of the 15 shop locations were occupied.

"Now all the retail space is spoken for and we have only two vacant offices upstairs," she said. "We've come a long way."

The business incubator, located at 23 E. Beach St., was designed to bring minority and women entrepreneurs together under one roof where they could benefit from shared services, business training and cooperative marketing efforts.

"Historically, businesses in an incubator setting are three times more likely to succeed," Olson said. "It's worth noting that a year after our opening we haven't lost a busi-

ness yet."

Olson said that in the past year, two businesses moved back to a discount mall after trying out the plaza location and that another business left after failing to open on a sustained basis. "It wasn't a serious effort," she said.

Originally, the idea behind the plaza was to "incubate" a business until it was strong enough to operate on its own in a free-standing location. But that philosophy has now changed, Olson said.

While leases are one year for retail shops and two years for restaurants, they can be renewed and there is no deadline for when a business will leave the premises, she said. She said imposing a deadline wouldn't be fair to the entrepreneurs, nor to customers who are becoming familiar with the businesses at Plaza Vigil.

"Tell me a good space where they can go and I'll let them go," Olson said. "Until the rest of downtown

begins to get really renewed and refurbished, I think they're kind of stuck.

"It goes both ways," she added. "You need good space downtown in order to succeed. The bottom line in retail is location, location, location."

Olson said an average of about 240 people visit Plaza Vigil businesses daily, a figure she considers good. Generally store hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays except Thursdays, when hours are extended to 9 p.m. Some businesses also are weekends.

Olson said most businesses operate six days a week, and that operators may choose to close on a weekday rather than a weekend.

Two businesses — Sofia Rivas' The Illusion Store and Ernesto Garcia's The City Cafe — are scheduled to open soon. Current Plaza Vigil tenants and their operators are:

Alba's Mexican Products, Heriberto Alba; Ayyad's Clothing, Fatima

Ayyad' Taqueria La Fuente, Nivardo and Alicia Barajas; Sweet Petals Flower Shop, Alejandra Casillas; Watsonville Soccer Shop, Beatriz Florez;

Hazzel Garcia's Janitorial, Pedro Garcia; Conchita's Ice Cream, Esther and Juan Roberto Gonzales; Un Toque Celestial, Magdalena Maciel; New Jerusalem Book Store, Steven Martinez; Romance Jewelers, Trinidad Melendres;

Bonita's Fashion, Maria Pena; Pagecraft, Carmen Rivas; Western Union, Carmen Rivas; Watsonville Communications, Carmen Rivas; Rodriguez Produce, Irma Rodriguez, and Glamour Cuts, Alicia Zamora.

Second floor occupants and their agencies are:

Human Resource Agency, JTPA; Pat Cane, Capacitar; Susan Olson, El Pajaro CDC; Jerry Hernandez, Main Street Watsonville; Kelly Navarro, Straight Up Enterprises; Theresa Thoma, SBDC; Jose Torres, Diversified Business Service.