

Watsonville redevelopment moves ahead

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Six months to the day after the Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed much of downtown, the long-stalled redevelopment process took three major steps forward Tuesday.

Acting as the Redevelopment Agency, the City Council voted to:

- Inform the county it's interested in moving the South County courthouse to either the 200 block of Main Street or the old post office;

- Establish a separate community development commission to handle downtown recovery and economic development;

- Explore the possibility of allowing more housing downtown.

Frustrated by the lack of progress on redevelopment and some of the "missed opportunities" of the past, council members said they are anxious to get moving on a plan to revitalize the city's core.

Councilman Oscar Rios said it's time the meetings had "more meat" to them.

"The sooner we can get a commission established the sooner we can get downtown rebuilt," said Mayor Todd McFarren.

Toward that end, the council voted to ask the Economic Development Committee and the Downtown Recovery Committee to forward a list of names from which five or seven people will be selected to head up a commission that will oversee downtown reconstruction.

It's expected the commission will have its own executive director to help coordinate private and public funding and construction projects.

The suggestion for the commission came from the Urban Land Institute, a Washington-based think tank of planning experts which sent a panel of planners to Watsonville last month.

Another ULI idea endorsed in concept Tuesday was the relocation of the Municipal Courthouse and possibly the Health Services Agency from Freedom Boulevard to downtown.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy cast the lone vote against exploring

the possibility of using the 200 block of Main Street for the county agencies. She said the city needs the sales and property tax revenues that would come from a retail center that's been proposed by Barry Swenson, a San Jose developer.

Murphy also said she didn't think there was enough room to accommodate the county agencies.

But Murphy joined the rest of the members in supporting a feasibility study of using the old post office as a courthouse.

The post office will vacate its Spanish-style building on Union Street this year and move to a new facility on the 200 block of Main Street.

Mayor McFarren said the county has done some preliminary work with Swenson, but in order to proceed with a facilities study it wanted to know if the City Council supported the concept.

"This doesn't commit us," McFarren said. But it does allow the planning process to proceed, he added.

On the housing issue, the council decided to begin the procedure for amending the zoning of the downtown redevelopment plan to allow housing exclusively on some parcels, and to do an analysis of combining the downtown and West-side redevelopment agencies and setting aside 20 percent of the redevelopment funds for low-income housing.

Planning Director Maureen Owens said she's been approached by developers interested in building low-income housing on the 100 block of Main Street, which has been vacant since the late 1960s.

The latest housing proposal is from CHISPA, the Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association, a non-profit housing group from Monterey County.

In a letter to the mayor, CHISPA Executive Director Ed Moncrief has outlined his intention to purchase at least three of the four acres on the 100 block of Main Street for some \$1.97 million and build low-income family housing for earthquake victims.