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New chamber boss no stranger to Watsonville

By LANE WALLACE
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Since she was named executive director of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, Charlene Shaffer has become particularly sensitive about people from Santa Cruz who look down on Watsonville as unsophisticated.

"There's an attitude of some Santa Cruzans who don't respect the uniqueness of Watsonville," said Shaffer, who was assistant director of the Santa Cruz Chamber before taking the Watsonville job.

She accepted the job in June and started work two weeks ago.

"Why does one community have to be better than another?" Shaffer asked. "We should recognize the differences; the communities should complement each other."

Shaffer, 45, is no stranger to Watsonville. She grew up in Santa Cruz and had periodic contact with people in Watsonville while at the Santa Cruz Chamber.

She's also met a number of South County people through her husband, Manny, an executive at Granite Rock Co. in Watsonville.

Before speaking to the Freedom Rotary Club last week, Shaffer asked for a membership list.

Shaffer said she knew, or knew of, about 40 percent of

them, and she told the members what she knew about them during her speech.

Speaking to groups and individuals will be a big part of Shaffer's job in the next two to three months.

"The chamber's planning conference is in November," she said. "By then I should be up to speed on what the concerns in the community are."

Even in the two weeks she's been on the job, Shaffer has heard plenty of opinions about what Watsonville needs.

"People are concerned about growth," Shaffer said.

"They want a balance between agriculture and development. They certainly care about quality of life."

Other issues that come up, she said, are affordable housing, "which doesn't necessarily mean subsidized housing," and downtown redevelopment.

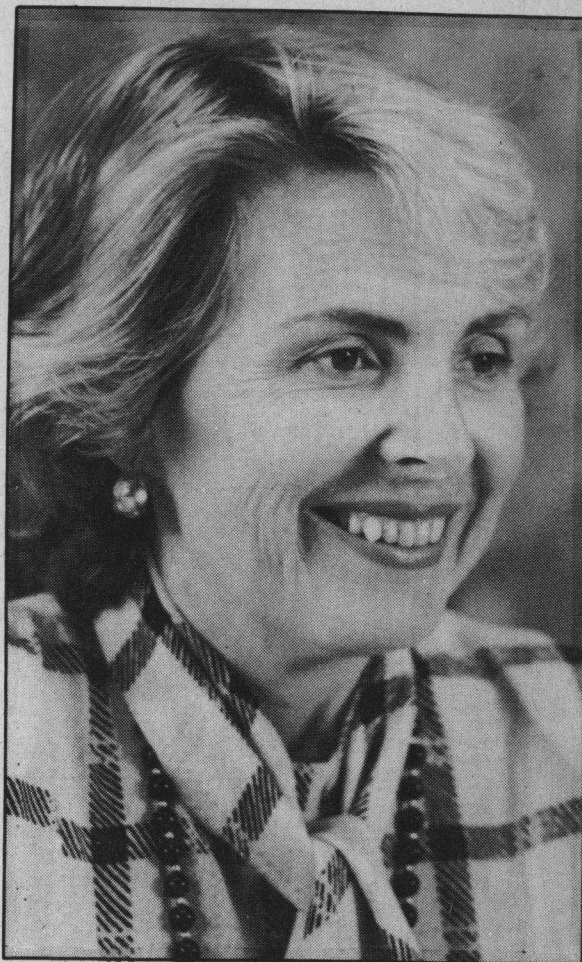
Shaffer admits the 18-month frozen-food strike that ended in March hurt the downtown.

"There's been some fallout," she acknowledged, but expressed confidence that things would get better.

She speaks enthusiastically about Watsonville, but she isn't gushing.

"I think we have an attractive downtown with a great deal of potential," she said, mentioning downtown projects such as the weekly farmer's markets and "Watsonville Days," set for late September and early October.

Watsonville Days will combine traditional events like the Apple Annual parade with



Charlene Shaffer

Kurt Ellison

new activities, including a wild-game cook-off, a boat show and a golf tournament. About half the Watsonville Days events will be downtown.

Shaffer wants to talk to a lot more people before she formulates opinions on the

major issues, but she does have a few ideas now for some improvements that don't cost much.

She'd like to see a "sprucing up" of the downtown, possibly with some planter boxes on Main Street. Those planter boxes could be filled

with locally grown flowers, Shaffer said, noting that Watsonville is one of the prime flower-growing regions in the country.

The chamber is also getting involved in efforts to preserve the 1,050-seat Fox Theater as a single hall, rather than having it split into three screens.

Shaffer noted that the chamber is an agency not of money, but of people trying to get things done to better the community. "The chamber doesn't set public policy. It influences it," she said.

Chamber president Scott Johnson called Shaffer a "real diamond" who "came right to the front" when directors considered candidates for the job.

"She's so excited about it," he said. "She's very comfortable" dealing with people.

Shaffer's experience in organizing a weeklong leadership training program for the Santa Cruz Chamber impressed Watsonville's board of directors, Johnson said.

Her hiring marks a change in direction for the Watsonville chamber, which had been paying its managers about \$20,000 a year.

That salary generally attracted applicants who had retired from other jobs and had a background in public relations or community activities, but not in chamber work. It had been five years since Watsonville had a manager who had chamber experience.

When manager Murray Crawford announced earlier this year he was retiring for health reasons, chamber directors decided to boost the pay to the \$30,000 range and change the title to executive director.

"We felt we would have to pay more to attract a person truly qualified in chamber management," Johnson said.

Shaffer had a background in volunteer chamber work before taking on her paid job at Santa Cruz.

From 1977 to 1982, when she owned Morgan's, a bar in Soquel, she was active in the Soquel Chamber, holding several offices. She helped organize the Soquel-O-Rama, an annual festival.

She also has experience in selling, having worked as a marketing representative for County Bank.

Shaffer, who started college at San Jose State after she graduated from high school, quit to go to work. She returned to school at UC-Santa Cruz, earning a degree in history when she was 30 years old.

On a corner of Shaffer's desk is something that shows she's making a commitment to Watsonville — there's a pile of real estate ads.

Although she's fond of her home in Santa Cruz, Shaffer is planning to move to South County. Her husband and children, boys aged 11 and 13, are not opposed, said Shaffer, who has her eye on Corralitos.