

Business people want some answers on the downtown

By CHELA ZABIN
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Impatience, worry and a bit of gallows humor were evident at a crowded meeting of Watsonville business people and government officials at City Hall yesterday afternoon. The meeting had been called to let business owners know about the building inspection process and available financial assistance.

City Manager John Radin ruled over the sometimes chaotic meeting as city, county and state officials tried to answer questions and respond to testy remarks.

The business people were understandably upset. In addition to the damaged buildings downtown, hundreds of other businesses have suffered damage, Radin said. Main Street will be closed for 10 to 14 days, he said.

Teams of inspectors from the Office of Emergency Services have begun an inspection and tagging process that will let shopkeepers as well as residents know the status of their buildings. The downtown buildings would be tagged first and would be done by the end of the day, Radin said, drawing complaints from business people outside of the downtown area wanting to know their status.

Radin and Police Chief Terry Medina explained the tagging procedure. A green tag means a building is fine and can be entered and used safely. A yellow tag allows business owners and employees to enter at their own risk to assess damages and salvage items. A red tag means a building is too dangerous to be entered at all, although it doesn't necessarily mean a building will be demolished.

In the downtown area, however, restrictions are even more severe. Buildings with green tags cannot be opened for business at all, except for banks with rear access facing away from Main Street, Medina said. The reason is that vehicles and even foot traffic cause vibrations that could cause more of the damaged buildings to fall.

Medina said this exception was made because residents are running out of cash and it applies only to retail banks.

Business people who find their buildings yellow-tagged can go into their buildings only after making arrangements with the police.

A number of people in the room immediately had questions. Watsonville Meat Company was expecting a delivery from out of state that would be impossible to cancel. Western Union's downtown office had tons of money being wired to local residents short of cash. Medina and other officials said it was possible that alternatives could be worked out.

Medina also said business people who find a red tag on their door can talk to police about getting into their businesses. Extra officers will be posted on the corners along Main Street to answer questions, he said.

"Make sure you put those tags on the back of the buildings, instead of the front, since we're not allowed on Main Street," said one man, getting a few laughs. Radin said he would do so.

Radin and Assemblyman Sam Farr also talked about federal funds, a subject of much interest. When the city manager told the group that FEMA hadn't yet located a site for an office, one

woman blurted out, "They could use my store."

Farr outlined the types of funds available through FEMA. Loans and assistance are available for businesses, homeowners and renters, he said. Among the available business loans are ones that would go to replacing lost property, including inventories and supplies, up to \$500,000. Another would replace working capital for up to \$500,000. Other funds are available for temporary housing, mortgage payments, rental assistance and unemployment.

The two types of business loans will be available at a 4 percent discount rate for businesses that have no credit and at 8 percent for those that do.

This angered one businessman, who asked if he was being penalized for being a good businessman who could get credit.

Farr replied that it was important to remember that these were emergency funds.

Farr and others told business people to take photographs and otherwise document all losses and any repairs made. Farr also said business people should first check with their insurance policies and try other methods of getting loans before applying to FEMA. The Watsonville Chamber of Commerce has more detailed information on the available FEMA loans. The chamber is closed but can be contacted at 761-1660.

He also said there was no cap on the amount FEMA would provide to Watsonville.

Farr couldn't say how long it would be before FEMA money was available. He did, however, urge business people and other residents to find out what they needed to do and take action quickly, because once the World Series starts, Santa Cruz County, now a center of media attention, will be "quickly forgotten" by the public.

"We're going to rebuild this town," he said. "We're going to rebuild it the way you want it rebuilt, and we're going to get your businesses back on their feet."

Ford Department Store's Hal Hyde handed Farr a batch of roses and urged the crowd to coordinate efforts and work together, especially because the FEMA money wouldn't be able to cover everything.

Charlene Shaffer, executive director of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, wearing a black-and-gold "I survived the 1989 earthquake, Watsonville" T-shirt, praised the work of government officials, residents, volunteers and the utility companies in dealing with the quake.

The shirts were being passed around after the meeting.

Another business meeting will be held Monday at 1 p.m. in the City Council chambers at City Hall.

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