

Watsonville may get own farmer's market

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WATSONVILLE — A farmer's market may be in the offing for downtown Watsonville this summer if city officials, farmers and merchants can swing it.

An informational meeting at City Hall Thursday drew together several downtown merchants, City Council members Roy Ingersoll and Betty Murphy, Mayor Ann Soldo, Sue Carota, president of the Monterey Bay Area Certified Farmers Market, and a couple of farmers to open discussion for a farmer's market in downtown.

Cal Watkins, manager of J.C. Pen-

ney Co. and a member of the Central Business Improvement District, said the idea for a farmer's market was first brought up 10 years ago.

"Right now we're just at the talking stage," he said. "But the idea is to get people to downtown Watsonville. What we're really trying to do is have happenings downtown."

Watkins would like to get the market under way by June, and run it through Thanksgiving. But before then, a lot of planning has to take place.

While nothing is in place yet, the ideas bandied about the meeting include linking the farmer's market with the Thursday night concert series at the City Plaza, which is scheduled to get under way April 23, or holding it on Sundays.

Mayor Soldo said the idea of the farmer's market Thursday evenings "sounds exciting. It would bring people to our downtown area, and having people go in and out of our stores maybe would encourage more stores to stay open Thursday nights."

In San Luis Obispo, a downtown farmer's market — with booths of fresh produce and food — draws up to 5,000 people.

Carota said her organization sponsors three farmer's markets — at Cabrillo College on Saturday morn-

ings, Monterey Peninsula College Thursday afternoons, and Hartnell College Sunday mornings.

About 60 farmers are in the organization, and as many as 40 turn up regularly to sell their produce, she said.

While Carota hasn't committed herself or the organization to the downtown Watsonville project, she said, "There's a potential for a certified farmer's market there."

She said any group of farmers can ask the state Department of Agriculture for certification to run an open-air market. The advantage of being certified is that certain laws, such as for packaging and weights, are waived, she said.

In her experience, location is "one of the most important things" that goes into making a successful farmer's market. The area has to be easily accessible, have restroom facilities, and should be closed to traffic.

If a downtown site is picked, Watkins said he would prefer it be on Main Street. However, that would require the approval of Caltrans, because Main Street is also state Highway 152.

If it's not on Main Street, Murphy said the group discussed locating it on an adjacent street, perhaps behind La Manzana.