

2Q-1989-Watsonville Rebuilding

Downtown plan wins support

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By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

The idea of a redevelopment plan for downtown Watsonville, talked about long before the earthquake but never implemented, got some support from downtown property owners and merchants last night at a Chamber of Commerce-sponsored dinner at the Miramar Grill.

No decisions were made and nobody was asked to make any commitments, but there was general support for the idea of a

redevelopment plan.

Len West, chairman of the Chamber's Economic Development Committee, said after the meeting, "We opened a dialogue that hadn't existed" among the property owners.

Two studies on redevelopment are being proposed, the group of 12 downtown business people (seven of them property owners) was told. City Planning Director Maureen Owens, Mayor Todd McFarren and County Supervisor Sherry Mehl also attended.

A \$100,000 government-funded study (\$75,000 state and \$25,000 federal) "would come up with a plan telling what we need to do to keep the downtown vital to Watsonville, the Pajaro Valley and Santa Cruz County," Owens said. The study, which could be done later this year, would go so far as to recommend what types of stores would succeed in downtown.

The Watsonville chamber wants to get a study by the Urban Land Institute, a

Washington-based group that will send a panel to Santa Cruz in March for a one-week study. The chamber is trying to get the institute to donate its fees (\$80,000) or get somebody else to pay for the study, which would provide a wide range of recommendations for the city's development.

The institute is interested in studying areas damaged by the earthquake, said Charlene Shaffer, the chamber's executive director.

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What'll it look like?

It's too early to tell what downtown Watsonville will look like when it's fully rebuilt from the 1989 earthquake, but it won't be anything outlandish.

"I haven't heard of anything we need to be alarmed about," said city Planning Director Maureen Owens, referring to conversations she and her staff have had with those considering downtown projects.

There is no thought to having all the buildings conform to a

certain type of architecture, Owens said in an interview yesterday.

The design of downtown buildings is reviewed by the city's Design Review Commission and ultimately must be approved by the City Council.

Owens said there are no applications for rebuilding downtown buildings demolished after the Oct. 17 earthquake. Property

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Studies of the downtown are nothing new. "We've had a lot of money spent on studies" over the years, said Steve Taylor of Taylor's Office Supply, but no action.

Ken Miller, owner of Johnson Drug Co., said downtown redevelopment "has been a bumpy, rough road." When the idea of redevelopment was kicked around in the past, "nobody wanted to put their money where their mouth was."

Miller, who owns the Jefsen Building where his drugstore used to be, moved the store to Brennan Street. He hasn't decided what to do with the Jefsen Building, now boarded up.

Mark Birns, who renovated the old Pajaro Valley Bakery building in the 500 block of Main Street into three stores last year, said he'd like to see a sort of "home-owners association" to make decisions for the downtown. Without some kind of organized effort, "I don't have confidence in the property owners to follow through, he said.

Most of those attending were from the 400 and 500 blocks of Main Street. There were some whose buildings were demolished, such as George Menasco of Ford's Department Store, and those who survived, such as Henry and Don Henrichsen of the family-owned John's Shoe Store.

"I'd like to see direct action" on redevelopment, Don Henrichsen said. The downtown business district, he said, has shrunk over the last 30 years. Stores and restaurants on the outer edges of downtown have "disappeared," he said.

Bruce Woolpert, of Granite Rock Co., suggested a board, headed by downtown property owners, who could review development ideas privately and make suggestions before a proposal becomes public.

Last night's meeting was a chamber "focus group," organized by Betsy Woolpert, retired president of Granite Rock and wife of Bruce Woolpert.

The Economic Development Committee will meet Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at the Chamber of Commerce office, 801 Freedom Blvd.

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owners in the 300 block of Main Street have submitted preliminary drawings for rebuilding the block with two-story buildings. They have not submitted an official application.

There are some studies in the works on rebuilding the downtown (see adjacent story), but there is nothing to stop somebody from coming in with a rebuilding plan before the studies are done.

"We are not going to do anything to stop them. We cannot dictate the timing. It's strictly up to economics, Owens said.

The planning staff will be looking at such things as diagonal parking (which the 300-block owners are proposing) and traffic patterns.

One possibility is a limited-traffic mall on Main Street, similar to the Pacific Garden Mall in Santa Cruz, an idea that has been discussed off and on for years by the Watsonville City Council. That idea never got far when downtown property owners heard cost estimates.

While the city must approve projects, "our role in almost superficial," Owens said. "It's not our land."

—Lane Wallace