



Emilio Alvarado

Monica Tejedas wraps candy at Watsonville's Marich Confections.

Life is sweet for candy man

Watsonville confectioner began with a few dollars

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — In 1957, Marinus van Dam came the United States from Holland. He had \$50 in his pocket and the only English he knew was "beef steak."

"Fifty dollars doesn't last too long when the only English words you know are 'beef steak,'" quipped van Dam.

Today, the 66-year-old van Dam owns a multimillion dollar candy manufacturing business in Watsonville that supplied former President Ronald Reagan with those famous jelly

beans.

That \$50 had a tragic note that van Dam was able to turn into sweet relief. His father was killed in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. When he came to the United States, he received \$50 from the U.S. government as compensation for his father's death, he said.

With \$50 and a steely determination, van Dam made his dreams come true. He started Marich Confections 11 years ago from the ground up in a warehouse on Hangar Way. It has

See CANDY / back of section ►

CANDY

► From Page 1

grown to two manufacturing operations, a warehouse and a corporate office, all within walking distance from each other on Hangar Way. The company, which employs between 35 to 50 workers, depending on the time of year, makes 140 varieties of candy.

Renovations are under way for expansion of a third manufacturing plant, which will be housed in the original location at 65 Hangar Way.

His business has shown a steady annual growth of 25 percent. In February alone business increased 100 percent, van Dam said. Business, he said, has been so good that he is looking at building a 150,000 square foot, \$4 million candy factory. He estimates he will need about six acres of land.

The question now is where he will build it. Several Western and Midwestern states and numerous Central Coast cities are saying they would make the perfect location, and they are willing to make him a sweet deal. Four cities in Iowa want his business.

Will he consider all those invitations and deals?

"I have to," van Dam said. "I have to."

His first choice is staying in Watsonville, but there's apprehension.

When he built the first factory, he had a bad experience with the city's planning department which nearly soured his business before it got a chance to get on its feet. The planning department initially approved the factory's blueprints. But once the plant was up and running, the department said a couple of air conditioning units did not fit city code. The needed changes to the factory drove costs \$40,000 over budget and nearly killed van Dam's dream.

"No sooner were things off and running, than things became unglued," van Dam said.

That experience plays on van Dam's mind when he considers building the new factory in Watsonville. His request of city planning department officials seems simple enough: "Help us get there. Don't put up road blocks."

Planning department officials

are keenly aware that problems exist within the department. Several businesses have complained of getting the run-around and receiving contradictory information. These problems have cost businesses money and caused expensive delays.

Last month, the City Council approved a proposal to hire a Fremont consultant who will help the planning department reorganize and streamline operations. The plan is to turn the planning department into a "one-stop shop."

Van Dam said his relationship with city officials is good and he has had several meetings with key city administrators about building the new plant.

"The city is making all the right moves," van Dam said.

He's not looking for "hand-outs" from the city, he said. He just wants assurance that he won't run into costly roadblocks and delays after construction starts.

Cities like Gilroy and Hollister have been courting van Dam for some time and are happy to give him special breaks on fees and guarantee that his project will be put on a "fast track" to construction. The savings in moving to Hollister, for example, could be about \$1 million.

That's a very attractive figure, he admits. But he also has to consider the consequences of moving to another city. The move would place a burden on his workers, all of whom live in the Watsonville area. Some of the workers have been with the company for years and have reached a very high level of expertise in candy making. Their experience is invaluable.

"Just the thought of losing one of those employees gives me the shakes," van Dam said.

Van Dam will keep an eye on how the expansion of the third plant will go. If it proves to be trouble-free, his commitment to staying in Watsonville will be strengthened, he said.

"We'll see," van Dam said.

What he has seen so far is good, van Dam said. "So far so good," he said.

"The city is eager to redeem itself," van Dam said. "It's good to see there is positive movement to keep business in the city."