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Kurt Ellison

Jerry Hernandez, left, talks with Main Street Chairman Andy Blake outside the city parking structure at West Beach and Rodriguez streets.

New Main Street czar settles in downtown

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

Jerry Hernandez is feeling positive about Watsonville.

Hernandez, who has been on the job as executive director and program manager of Main Street Watsonville for a week and a half, said Watsonville is "well poised" for economic growth and recovery.

"There's a shared vision" among city officials, staff, business people and community members for the downtown and for the growth of the city overall, Hernandez said. That vision, and the willingness to work together, count for a lot, he said.

Watsonville was one of five cities chosen last summer by the state Department of Commerce to participate in the California Main Street program, designed to rejuvenate downtown areas. While it does not fund the actual work, it does give cities a structure for revitalization, technical expertise and provides a network of other cities in the Main Street program across the country that can be contacted for advice.

Main Street cities are required to, among other things,

establish a volunteer organization of business people, downtown property owners and others to carry out the program. In Watsonville, this organization was created by combining the Downtown Business Association and the Watsonville Development Committee to create Main Street Watsonville.

Hernandez was hired to coordinate and guide the efforts of the new organization.

In an interview yesterday that included the organization's chairman, Andy Blake, Hernandez explained that the Main Street program deals with four areas: design, organization, promotions and business restructuring. The organization has formed subcommittees to work in each area.

The design aspect covers everything from preservation of historic buildings to window displays and landscaping, Hernandez said. The organization aspect includes encouraging the businesses to keep similar hours and otherwise work together; promotions deals with bringing people to the downtown area; and economic re-

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structuring covers business retention and expansion, and attracting new businesses to the area.

Hernandez has an office next door to the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce on the second floor of the Wells Fargo Bank building. For now, the chamber is providing him with secretarial help.

He spent the last week and a half looking over the various studies that have been done on the downtown economy and Watsonville's economy in general, meeting people and familiarizing himself with the various ongoing efforts to improve the downtown. He's also worked with some merchants on making their window displays more effective, he said.

In time, he said, he hopes the Main Street program will become the organization through which all the efforts to improve downtown will be coordinated.

Hernandez said the community shouldn't expect to see immediate changes as a result of the Main Street program.

"A lot of times, what goes up fast comes down fast," he said. He said he'd rather see the group take on a few projects and do them well than attempt a lot of projects and do them poorly. He also said he's concerned with making sure the project builds credibility in the community.

But Blake, who owns Healthy Natural Foods on East Lake Avenue, said he's seen changes already.

"The unity of our organization is remarkable," Blake said. Ten people from Watsonville, including two city staffers, Planning Director Maureen Owens and Housing and Economic Development Director Ned Madonia, attended a four-day training workshop in Asilomar put on by the state Main Street program, he said.

For the next six months, Hernandez said, he'll be working with various subcommittees on putting together work plans for each of the areas they'll be dealing with and creating databases relevant to the downtown — such as a listing of the vacant office space. This information will be useful in the various pro-

grams Main Street will carry out, but it will also provide a way to measure the group's progress, Hernández said. He'll be putting together a newsletter and contacting consultants who he hopes might offer their expertise to Watsonville.

Hernandez will also be working on a couple of Christmas events the group has planned.

Funds for the Main Street program are coming from city redevelopment money, the Central Business Improvement District business-license surcharge, and Measure E, the earthquake tax approved by voters in 1990.

Because the budget is slim, Hernandez said, he's hoping the community will contribute expertise, time, office supplies and cash.

Before coming to Watsonville, Hernandez had worked with the Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association in Salinas for six years. There, he helped develop a master plan for a major economic-revitalization program in East Salinas. The program involves construction of 165,000 square feet of buildings that when completed will house a community center, a day-care

center, doctor's offices, other professional offices, a *mercado* and other businesses and agencies.

A portion of the project, funded through public and private sources, has gone up. The rest has been put on hold because of the bad economic times, Hernandez said.

The economy's woes are real and they affect projects, Hernandez said, adding, "I don't care how exciting your program is."

But he said he's encouraged by the support and unanimity he sees between the community and the city and by the community pride he senses in Watsonville. He's pleased by the progress on earthquake recovery and by the fact that many of the people who own property and businesses in Watsonville also live in the area and are interested in continuing to invest in it.

He said the community's diversity — in ethnicity, age and class — makes for a variety of marketing niches that have historically been overlooked in the state.

Hernandez can be reached by calling 724-3954.