

Earthquake 1989 - Watsonville Rebuilding RP 4/17/90

Rebuilding the downtown

The main problem is money

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OCT. 17 CHANGED the way Watsonville residents think about the downtown, Charlene Shaffer, executive director of the Watsonville Area Chamber of Commerce, said.

Suddenly, faced with losing it as a viable business core, people from every segment of the community began to contribute to efforts to keep it alive.

"The quake did help us focus on what the downtown meant to all of our population," Shaffer said.

The committees and political impetus are rolling, with more participation than ever. But the fact is, much of the success of downtown recovery will depend on the resources of the downtown property owners, she said.

Residents must realize that while rebuilding efforts seem to be crawling, they are actually moving quite fast, she said.

"A lot of exciting things have happened in a relatively short time," Shaffer said. "I don't think most people realize how much has been accomplished."

The chamber itself has been so busy that it has had to triple its staff through a grant program.

It did all the things it normally would have done or things it was already working on when the quake hit, such as promotional "buy local" campaigns, including one at Christmas. It co-sponsored the Business Fair in March, drawing close to 800 people and more than 100 businesses to showcase local goods and services. And it is up to its ears in preparations for the Cinco De Mayo Fiesta festival downtown.

But added to the regular activities, there has also been an intense battle simply to keep infor-



Diane Varni

See REBUILD page 7 ► The Fox Theatre has a hopeful message on its marquee.

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ation and money flowing, Shaffer said.

After the earthquake, the chamber quickly launched the BEAR project, or Business Earthquake Area Relief, which has so far raised more than \$150,000 and made nearly 50 grants. It is still getting requests for help from businesses.

The chamber also held public meetings with state Small Business Administration officials about relief loans, and invited merchants

who survived financially in the Whittier quake to meet with merchants here.

Chamber officials wrote a successful grant application to the state Department of Commerce for the modular units that are now housing several businesses on empty lots on Main Street. The effort saved 92 jobs downtown, Shaffer said. The modular "Victory Plazas," which opened in January, will celebrate an official grand opening May 17.

A Downtown Recovery Committee of chamber members grew into a group that soon included

city and community representatives as well. The group persuaded the Urban Land Institute, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., to send a study team to Watsonville for free.

As a result, the Urban Land Institute panel that undertook a week of intensive study in Watsonville from March 18 to 23 is publishing a thick report of recommendations on how to plan and build a successful downtown. Many of the recommendations have already been made public, and received an enthusiastic response from business and civic leaders.

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The chamber was also instrumental in arranging for a state legislative hearing, which will take place Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the chamber office on Freedom Boulevard. The state Assembly Select Committee on Small Business will hear from local merchants about efforts to recover from the quake.

Plans are also in the works to establish a farmers' market on the 400 block near where Ford's was.

Although she's tired, Shaffer said, she is fueled by optimism.

"I think we're coming back really vibrantly," Shaffer said. "Our

downtown is going to be rebuilt quickly - I would anticipate that over the next six months groundbreaking will be taking place and people will be getting under way with their construction."

The biggest problem, she said, is financing.

"A lot of people don't realize that (owners) still have to pay debts on buildings that aren't there," she said. "Plus they have all the construction costs of whatever new buildings they put up. It's not a matter of political will or lack of consensus to do that - it's resources."