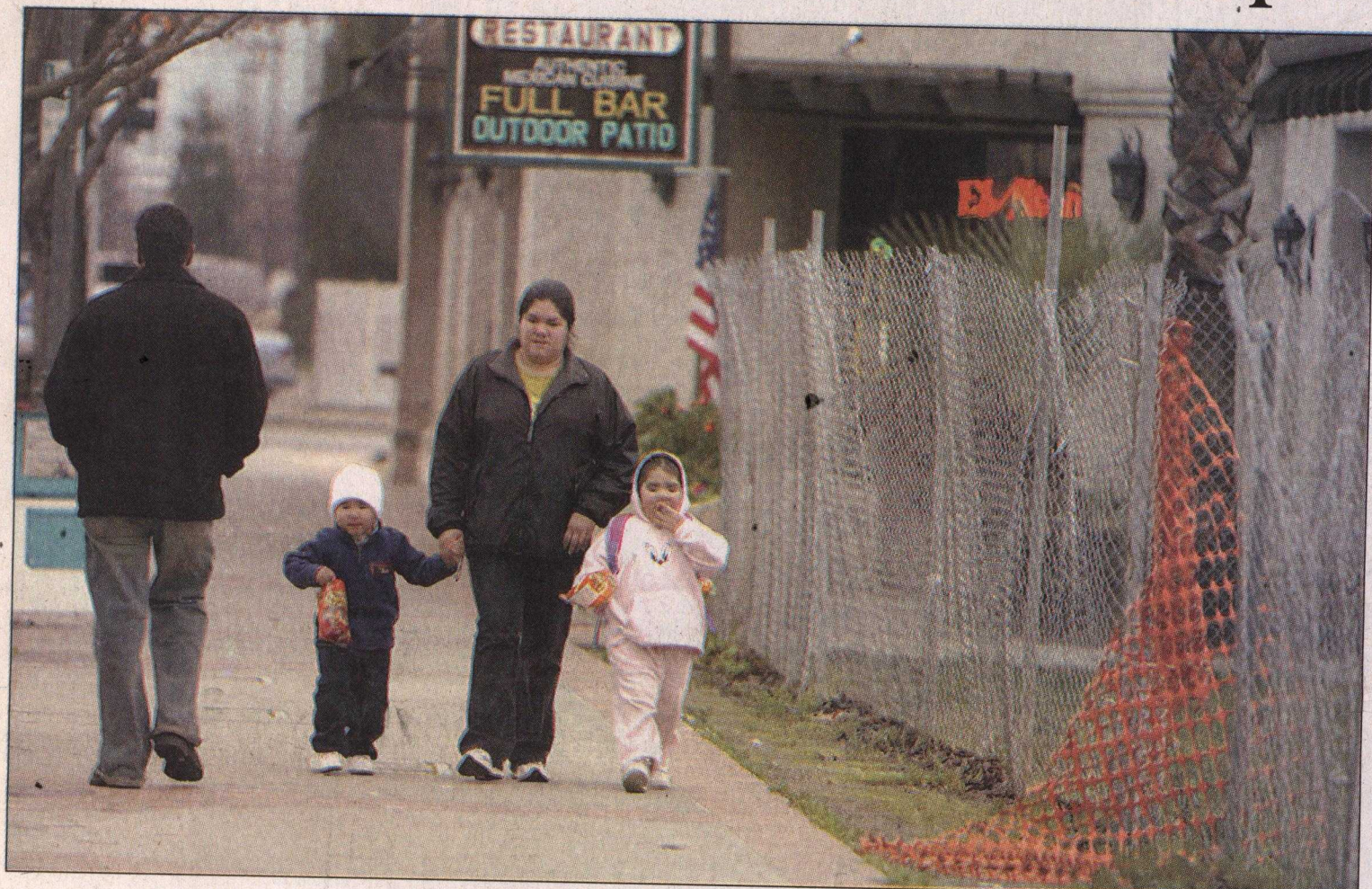


Watsonville refurbishment on tap



Pedestrians stroll the 300 block of Main Street in downtown Watsonville. A flurry of building projects is slated for the area in 2005. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Watsonville - Growth Downtown plans include Civic Center, housing, shops

By **DONNA JONES**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — For 15 years, since the Loma Prieta earthquake shattered much of the downtown, vacant lots have studded the heart of the city.

But that will change as the new year brings a flurry of building projects to the 300 block of Main Street, beginning to fill the empty spaces and creating the potential for new stores, coffee shops and professional services.

The projects are progressing as the city's long-awaited Civic Center finally gets off the ground with construction of a parking garage at Second and Rodriguez streets. The Civic Center has been likened to the movie complex on Pacific Avenue that provided Santa Cruz's downtown a needed

stimulus after the earthquake left it in ruins.

"It is the time for Watsonville," said Jim Petroutsas, who plans to develop a sliver of land at the corner of Main and Second streets. "It's growing."

Petroutsas' family owns several properties downtown, including a two-story building at 349 Main St. that houses the Sentinel's Pajaro Valley office. His latest venture at the corner of Main and Rodriguez will provide housing and retail space.

Also in the works is a 20,000-square-foot retail and office building at the corner of Second and Rodriguez streets. Nearby quarters for the Watsonville/Aptos Adult School are also in the works.

Construction of all three projects is expected to begin in the summer. They will join a 40-unit apartment

complex under construction a block away at Rodriguez and West Beach Street.

Architect Bob Corbett, whose Watsonville architectural firm is designing all three projects, called the Civic Center the impetus for much of the planned construction. The four-story building will encompass the entire 200 block of Main Street, housing courts, a library and city administration when complete in 2007. The adjacent six-story garage will provide more than 450 parking spaces.

In Santa Cruz, which also saw much of its downtown ravaged by the quake, a movie theater complex provided an anchor for a bustling entertainment and shopping district, Corbett said. But unlike Santa Cruz, Watsonville's

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By the Numbers

23,000 SQUARE FEET: The approximate amount of new retail and office space coming downtown.

42: The number of new apartments expected downtown.

6: The number of new classrooms coming downtown.

Watsonville

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downtown isn't so much of a destination, he said, so city leaders had to find other ways to draw people.

"(Watsonville) will never be what Santa Cruz is," said City Manager Carlos Palacios. "We don't have a university."

But Watsonville is growing, and with outward expansion limited, business eventually will have to come downtown.

It's taking time, Palacios said, but he sees signs of a growing economic vitality in the popularity of downtown restaurants like Lorenzini's, which opened in March, and Jalisco's, a perennial favorite.

The Civic Center builds on the development of about 45,000 square feet of office space for Santa Cruz County workers on West Beach Road and the establishment of Cabrillo College's downtown campus on the other side of the plaza. These developments help the city achieve "the critical mass you need to complete the core of the downtown," Corbett said.

"The city has been working very hard trying to attract businesses, housing, industrial and education to the downtown," he said. "They all involve people and the need for services."

Downtown projects

The lower end of Main Street and nearby is expected to be a hub of construction this summer as three major projects get under way.

■ **307 Main Street:** A two-story, 6,210-square-foot building will go up on a vacant lot. The project consists of two three-bedroom apartments upstairs and one or two retail spaces on the first floor.

■ **300 Rodriguez Street:** A two-story, 20,000-square-foot retail and office building will be constructed on a parking lot.

■ **330 Rodriguez Street:** Remodeling and expansion of existing building for use by Watsonville Adult School. The plan includes six classrooms, a student lounge, a baby-sitting area and an outdoor patio.

Jorge Zarat, manager of L.A. Men's Wear on Main Street, said he'll be pleased to see the vacant lots filled with businesses attracting more people downtown. But he also sees another benefit.

"It means more jobs for people," Zarat said.

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