

Business people want answers

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

Sonja Escalante wants to reopen her store on Main Street in Watsonville, but she's in a quandary.

Escalante, who owns Touch of Elegance, a bridal shop at 518 Main St., is awaiting word on the fate of her building before deciding how she'll proceed with her business.

Escalante said she'd like to stay in her building, and if that's not possible, somewhere else in the downtown. But she can't wait too long to find a place.

"I can't afford to be out of business more than a month," said Escalante, who took out a loan on her house to buy the business last year. "If it's more than a month, that's it." She has a staff of herself and two others.

"I've had an offer in Monterey, to open there," Escalante said. She said if she were to open there, she wouldn't reopen in Watsonville.

Escalante made her comments after a meeting at City Hall yesterday, in which downtown merchants were urged to stay there.

"It's very important to keep doing business downtown," said Tony Campos, a member of the City Council and president-elect of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce.

"We need to work together to keep rents down," Campos, who led the meeting in the absence of City Manager John Radin, said.

"We need to help you relocate temporarily," Campos said. He said city leaders were looking at the cost of renting trailers, which could be placed in the downtown temporarily.

Trailers were used in Whittier two years ago after much of that city's central business district was destroyed by an earthquake.

The trailers would be the ideal temporary solution for small businesses, one man from the audience said.

"Give them a spot and they'll make a profit," he said.

Dan Ukestad, an accountant with an office in the Mansion House, said business people are getting conflicting information about inspections and other rules about their buildings.

"Where can we get consistent information?" Ukestad asked.

"I'm getting the same story myself," said Campos, a part-owner of the Tuttle Mansion, which has been red-tagged. A red tag means a building isn't fit for occupancy now, but it doesn't necessarily mean the building can't be restored.

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Kurt Ellison

Nancy Hendee, left, part owner of the Porter Building on Watsonville's Main Street, joined other concerned business people at a meeting on historic preservation.

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A few downtown merchants have relocated, but most are awaiting word on their buildings, Watsonville Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Charlene Shaffer said after the meeting.

Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Carmel, told the merchants the state is trying to see that there's a focus on business in the efforts at earthquake relief.

Armando Morlos, president of the California Hispanic Chambers

of Commerce, said he was working to get funds sent directly to the Hispanic Chamber, which will then be used to help local business people.

At another meeting yesterday at City Hall on preservation of historic buildings, Marie Devery, co-owner of the 75-year-old Lettunich Building on Main Street, complained that the red tag on the building isn't warranted and is driving her tenants away.

The tenants think it's condemned and are moving out, Devery said. She said the inspector who tagged the building based the decision on damage

done by a boiler explosion several years ago.

Devery said her anchor tenant, Pacific Western Bank, canceled its lease in the belief the building was condemned, and Dr. Jeff Solinas moved out and signed a three-year lease at another location in Watsonville.

Steade Craigo, deputy state historic preservation officer for the Department of Parks and Recreation, told the gathering of 25 that if they don't agree with a city opinion that a building should be demolished, they should hire a structural engineer.

Craigo said city officials said

the Masonic Temple on Maple Street would have to come down, but an engineer from Los Angeles said the building could be repaired for \$48,000.

Craigo said building owners can seek a historical designation for their buildings from the city, state or federal governments, which would allow them more options in repairing their buildings.

Marilyn McLachlan, of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association, said her group had received a grant to pay engineers to look at historical buildings to see if they can be saved.