

By MARK BERGSTROM

Sentinel Staff Writer

The stage coach, familiar trademark of Wells Fargo Bank, has been replaced by the bulldozer in the minds of some Watsonville residents.

Historical preservationists in Watsonville are fighting to keep Wells Fargo from tearing down the 82-year-old Marinovich Building for a parking lot.

The struggle has presented an image problem for the bank, which bases its advertising on its ties with the Old West. Its TV commercials portray a stage coach roaring into town in a cloud of dust to deliver the gold.

Bank officials have publicly termed the situation in Watsonville as being "touchy."

Late last year, the bank purchased the Marinovich Building, located across from the city's historic plaza, and obtained a permit to tear it down to make way for what it says is a much-needed parking lot for its customers.

Granting of the demolition permit prompted the preservationists, led by former city planner Chuck Rowe, to file suit to stop the bulldozing until public hearings are held and an environmental assessment conducted.

Superior Court Judge Rollie Hall last December granted a temporary restraining order against the demolition, but early in February, Judge Chris Cottle canceled that order when he ruled in favor of the bank.

Rowe, who heads the Preservation Defense Fund to save the building, has appealed Cottle's decision to the state Court of Appeals in San Francisco. The case is before a three-judge panel that will rule if the case has merit for a full court hearing. Meanwhile, the bank again is prohibited from tearing the building down.

Even if the court should eventually rule in favor of the preservationists, Rowe says it will be a "no-win" victory for it would only force the city to hold hearings and conduct an environmental assessment on the demolition. The city already has announced its support for the bank's proposal.

But, says Rowe, "Wells Fargo must still make a decision (to tear the building down) in light of community sentiment."

Community sentiment runs high on both sides of the issue, which Rowe describes as "property rights versus community interest."

Those like Rowe who want the building preserved say it not only is important because of its late-Victorian architectural style, but because it joins buildings of other eras and architectural styles to frame Watsonville's historic downtown plaza. The Marinovich building is at the southeast corner of the plaza.

Support for preserving the Marinovich Building, which, until its sale to the bank housed the Steam Roller Club that catered to oldtimer locals, has come from a host of historical societies.

Alexander Henson of the state Office of Historic Preservation has called the building "a significant local historical and architectural resource."

Preservationists also point out that the building is listed in the California Historic Resources Inventory and is eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Preservation of the old building, Rowe believes, is the key to revitalizing the entire downtown area. "It's my contention that Watsonville should capitalize on its old buildings. We have such an enriched downtown because of our architectural resources. Those resources can be translated into dollars," Rowe believes.

"Every other community is trying to re-create what we already have," he says.

Rowe points to the Mansion House on Main Street as a prime example of revitalization through preservation.

Pat Pirtle, past president of the Pajaro

Marinovich Structure In Watsonville

Battle To Save Building In The Courtroom

Valley Historical Association, explains that the Mansion House building also had been scheduled for demolition until the society stepped in and found a buyer who was willing to restore the old structure. Now completed, the Mansion House has become a focal point of downtown Watsonville. Both Pirtle and Rowe have offices in that building, which also houses a first-floor restaurant.

Rowe and Pirtle believe they would be able to find a buyer for the Marinovich Building if Wells Fargo would agree to an alternative plan proposed by preservationists.

By tearing down the Marinovich Building, Wells Fargo says it can obtain 18 customer parking places.

Rowe says the bank could still get eight of those parking places by removing two sheds at the rear of the building (adjacent to the bank's existing parking lot) and still allow the facade of the building to remain standing.

Then, if the city would rearrange parking on Peck Street in front of the building, Rowe estimates the remaining 10 parking places could be provided.

Rowe hopes such a compromise can be worked out with Wells Fargo. Bank spokeswoman Kim Kellogg told The Sentinel that Wells Fargo has "heard" about such a suggestion, but so far has no "formal proposal" to respond to.

In the meantime, she said, the bank will await the outcome of the lawsuit in the Court of Appeals.

If the preservationists are upset about the bank's plan to tear down the building, they're hopping mad over Watsonville's method of granting demolition permits.

"There are no restrictions now on demolishing a building," says Pirtle. "You don't have to even show what you're going to put up like you would if you were building on vacant land."

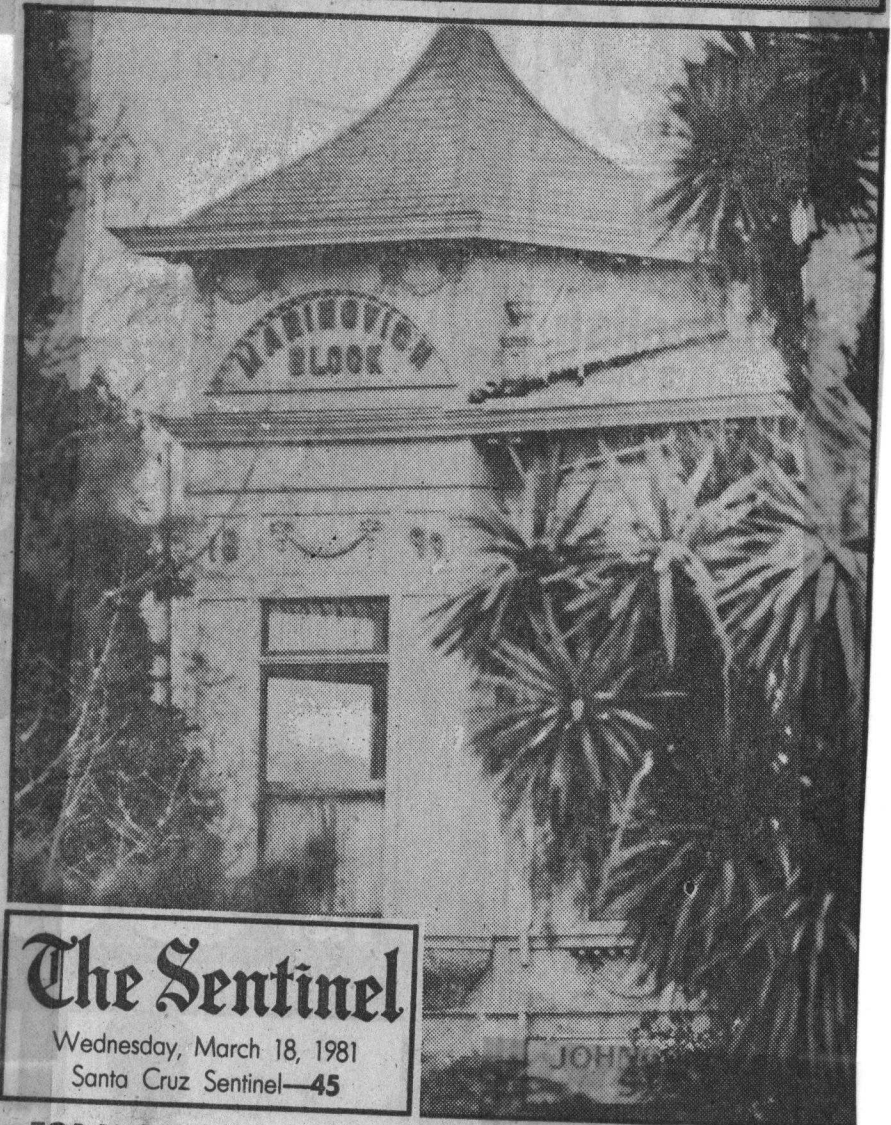
Pirtle says the Pajaro Valley Historical Association has been trying for three years to get the city to adopt a historical preservation ordinance to set standards for demolishing old buildings. The Watsonville City Council, according to City Manager John Radin, is scheduled to hold a hearing on such an ordinance later this month.

The absence of a preservation ordinance and the lack of public hearings required for demolition permits, Rowe believes, may be of benefit in this case, however.

"Inadvertently, the City Council's lack of action has become the best thing for historical preservation because the people are really worked up over this thing," says Rowe.

In the end, it may be public sentiment that dictates what will become of the Marinovich Building.

REFERENCE



The Sentinel

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TOP PHOTO - Watsonville preservationists point to the Mansion House on Main Street as an example of what can be done when buildings are 'revitalized.'

BOTTOM PHOTO - Battle to save the Marinovich Building from being demolished is now at the state Court of Appeals.