

Signs of life among ruin in downtown Watsonville

EARTHQUAKE '89 - Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — At first glance, downtown Watsonville looks as if it's been bombed. Bulldozers and giant cranes are crashing into the dozen or so buildings on the 300, 400 and 500 blocks of Main Street that were badly damaged by last month's earthquake.

But signs of life are there, too.

Despite the economic shock caused by the temblor, a large percentage of downtown businesses are back in operation at new locations. And some are relocating to new stores in downtown.

Some say that the Christmas shopping season is not as crucial to this town as it is in other areas and are optimistic the downtown will come back.

"I honestly don't think we had the attrition of some other areas, mainly because we had the space available," said Charlene Shaffer, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce. She estimated that more than 80 percent of the businesses hit by the earthquake are back in operation.

Shaffer is working with the state Department of Commerce to bring six trailers to Watsonville to replace businesses that lost their buildings. So far, six retail and one non-profit organization have tentatively signed up for the trailers, which Shaffer said she hopes to have set up by Dec. 10.

The Commerce Department has given the chamber a \$33,000 grant to subsidize the venture. Part of the grant will go toward the \$21,000 expense of transporting the trailers from San Lorenzo, near Oakland, and setting them up. Shaffer said a tentative site has been found at the lot that used to house the Odd Fellows building on East Beach Street.

"All of them we've got lined up were downtown businesses that want to stay downtown," Shaffer said.

Rents will run from 50 cents to 65 cents a square foot, with the size of the rented space varying from 500 square feet to 2,100 square feet, according to Shaffer.

Rental costs are a big issue in downtown Watsonville, where many mom-and-pop stores have subsisted for years on nominal rents with long-term leases.

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Watsonville/ Many businesses locating outside downtown

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Typically, rents in downtown ran from 50 cents to about \$1 a square foot.

Rents at the new shopping centers on the north end of Main Street at Green Valley Road begin at \$1.35 and escalate with advertising fees, maintenance fees and other add-on costs, making them prohibitive for marginal small businesses.

But many businesses are finding cheaper space in other areas, such as Freedom Boulevard and East Lake Avenue.

"I have some clients that relocated, and in some cases their rents are a little higher, even though they're not in the shopping centers," said Dan Ukestad, a certified public accountant. "My main concern is that they bring their business up to where they were before the earthquake, and to do that they'll have to get their clients to follow them. It's too early to tell on that."

Mark and Peter Birns just opened their store on the 500 block of Main Street — the Sporting Life — and have rented retail space to Felix's Record Shop and Gonzales Jewelers, both of which were forced to move after the earthquake.

The Birns' Star Surplus store and Felix's were displaced once before — in 1987 when the city demolished the 200 block of Main Street to make way for a redevelopment project that has yet to get under construction. Peter Birns' business had been in the 200 block since 1963.

When the Birnses were pushed out because of redevelopment, they bought the old Pajaro Valley Bakery building and renovated it — a project which took 1½ years to complete.

Felix Sanchez moved his record store to the 300 block of Main Street, but lost the space when the building was irreparably damaged in the earthquake.

Gonzales Jewelers had been at the Hildreth building on the 300 block of Main Street for 18 years, but had to move because of earthquake damage to the building.

George Mader, a lecturer at Stanford University, questioned whether Watsonville will recover.

"Businesses may try to borrow money to pay for reconstruction, and in economically thriving towns like Los Gatos, where demand is high, these loans may be enough to get damaged businesses back on their feet," Mader said. "But if there isn't a market for the businesses, it's going to be very hard to get them re-established."

Mark Birns is optimistic about downtown's chances of survival.

"I think it's going to do really well," he said. "The people who own it have the money to do it right."

Birns said only a handful of people actually own the buildings that were damaged in the earthquake.

"I'd like to see the handful of property owners get together and do a planned development with one



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Six weeks after the earthquake, much of downtown Watsonville still lies in ruin.

architect," he said.

In principal, he supports the proposal by developer John Fry of C/D/M Corp. and Tony Campos to have the private property owners pool their resources and rebuild the demolished part of downtown with a mix of retail, commercial and housing.

"I think it's going to be a while, but it'll be stronger," he said.

One aspect that makes Watsonville different than Santa Cruz is the shopping habits of the residents.

"History tells us we can expect a pretty decent two weeks around Christmas, but Watsonville is such a seasonal town it doesn't really blossom until May through the end of October when the workers return," Birns said.

Although a larger middle-class population is moving into the city because of the new housing, Birns believes the basic shopping habits will remain strong for years to come.

Sanchez, of Felix's Record Shop, said the rent he's being charged by the Birnses is about the same as he paid on the 300 block of Main Street, but the space is new and better lit.

"I believe downtown will do well, as soon as we get the new buildings up, people will come back. I wanted to stay downtown because that's where our business is. We stay open Sundays and see a lot of business. People are still coming downtown on Sundays," Sanchez said.

Jardiel Pinto, an employee at Gonzales Jewelers, said his boss thought of locating in the shopping centers, but there were long waits to lease the space and one of the shopping centers already had a jewelry store and was unable to lease space to another one.

"But, we really wanted to be downtown, to be close to the Hispanic clients. They're our base. I think once they find us, we'll do well," he said.

Doomed buildings

WATSONVILLE — The following is a list of buildings already razed or currently under demolition on Main Street and adjacent blocks, and the businesses which were tenants in them, according to the records of the city of Watsonville Finance Department and Planning Department, and the Watsonville Area Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture.

301 Main St. — Canada Shoes.

307 Main St. — Boulevard Sportswear.

312-316 Main St. — El Morelia Restaurant and Gonzales Jewelers, Inc.

311-317 Main St. — GB Family Wear, Discotec OTI Records and Tapes, La Playita del Sol Restaurant and Ace Hardware Store.

323 Main St. — Jalisco Restaurant.

325-327 Main St. — Horsnyder Pharmacy and Felix's Record Shop

329-339 Main St. — Family Bargain Center, Dori's Bridal World and Don Roberto Jewelers.

341 Main St. — Dori's Photography and Formal World.

345-347 Main St. — Zapateria Cinco Hermanos and Watsonville Jeans.

407 Main St. — Ford's Department Store and Burdick's TV and Stereo.

439-445 Main St. — Western Auto Parts, Ernie's Lady Fair Shoppe, and Watsonville Vacuum and Sewing Center.

23-25 Maple Ave. — Watsonville Masonic Temple, Masonic Hall Association, Lily of the Valley Chapter No. 18 (OES), Order of De Molay, Order of Job's Daughters, Order of Rainbow Girls, Pajaro Lodge No. 110 (F&AM), Past Matrons and Patron of the Easter Star, Scottish Rite Temple, Temple Chapter No. 41 (RAM) and Watsonville Com mandery No. 22 (KT).

11 E. Beach St. — Skills Center Pajaro Valley Training Center.

13 E. Beach St. — Beach Street Video.

17-17A E. Beach St. — Kane-Hall-Palmtag Insurance and Real Estate, IOOF Pajaro Lodge 90, Odd Fellows Hall 90, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, Croatia Fraternal Union of American Victory Lodge No. 353, Knockti Tribe No. 126, Native Sons of the Golden West Lodge 65, Paradise Rebekah Lodge No. 62 (IOOF), United Trainmen's Union Local 876 and Watsonville Encampment No. 91 (IOOF)

21 E. Beach St. — Bake Rite Bakery and Watsonville Tae Kwon Do.