



Marinovich Fight Continues to Boil

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The hottest issue to hit South County since Governor Brown's appointment of Chris Matthews to the Board of Supervisors has come in the form of the fight to save an empty, 82-year-old Victorian structure. The Marinovich Building stands adjacent to Wells Fargo Bank's downtown Watsonville branch, and was recently purchased by the bank.

After the purchase, the bank applied for, and was issued, a demolition permit by the city to raze the landmark structure to make way for a 17-car parking lot.

News of the demolition stunned downtown revitalization advocates and historic preservationists. Chuck Rowe, a former city planner and longtime preservation advocate, explained their position: "If the irony of Wells Fargo—a bank steeped in Californian history—choosing to tear down a historical landmark isn't enough to halt the demolition, then the local importance of the building is. We're dismayed at the city's consent of the whole matter."

The building occupies one of the four corner spots in

the "frame of buildings" surrounding Watsonville's unique downtown plaza. Retaining the integrity of the plaza is seen by many to be the anchor of recent efforts to revitalize the entire downtown area.

The trend toward restoration was given a significant boost by the highly successful revival of the nearby Mansion House. That structure was saved from its slated demolition, and is recognized statewide as an example of architectural reuse.

Bolstered by the Mansion House experience, the preservationists—led by Rowe—filed suit in Santa Cruz Superior Court. Initially they requested a temporary restraining order (TRO) to postpone the demolition. The TRO was issued in mid-December by judge Rollie Hall, but the battle had just begun.

In the following weeks, the issue captured the town's attention. Rumors circulated that the preservationists' efforts were forcing Wells Fargo to relocate out of the downtown. The bank—one of the largest dollar volume branches in the state because of the area's multi-million dollar agricultural industry—steadfastly maintained that its business was being severely hurt by the limits of its existing parking lot.

Rowe, on the other hand, claimed that such fears were "nonsense....Why would a bank already doing the largest dollar volume in South County leave its plaza location or its completely paid-for building?"

Rowe's contention, when filing the suit, was simple: he felt the demolition of the Marinovich Building would be a "significant loss" to the community and, therefore, the issuance of a demolition permit should have been subject to public review. Rowe contends that the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires just such public review.

Watsonville City Attorney Don Haile, along with Wells Fargo's attorneys argued that there was doubt regarding the historical importance of the building. They did so in the face of testimony given by Bill Sugaya, head of the Western office of the National Trust, a prestigious national historic preservation association. Sugaya testified to the building's historic merits and its eligibility for placement on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

Given the case's documentation only shortly before the trial, Superior Court Judge Chris Cottle adjourned the proceedings without a decision. Four days later, Cottle returned a decision against the preservationists and lifted the TRO blocking demolition. The building's demolition was thus scheduled.

Rowe, now fully backed by an organized Preservation Defense fund, filed an appeal of Cottle's decision with the San Francisco Court of Appeals. Informed of the impending demolition of the appeal's subject, the court responded within 48 hours—this time granting the preservationists one more temporary delay on the demolition.

Even with the court order, Rowe was uneasy. "I feared the midnight bulldozer would strike, wiping out all of our efforts." That night the building's supporters kept a vigil at the building. At 6:30 the next morning, an errant Ranzazzo Demolition Company crew arrived on the scene, only to be chased off by a dozen demolition opponents.

Public interest ;continues to run high regarding the building's fate. Preservationists have picked up some notable support from Watsonville City Councilman Vido Deretich. Deretich, a "born again" preservationist, changed his mind regarding the demolition of the Marinovich Building only after he saw the amount of public support for the building's preservation. (Deretich went so far as to present his own plan to renovate the building for use by a local Yugoslavian club.)

In the meantime, other alternatives have been presented. Including a new parking plan designed by Rowe. Rowe's plan would save the building while still providing the bank with its added parking. Exact plans—if they exist—have not been spelled out by Rowe as the *Express* goes to press.

Wells Fargo maintains a cautious attitude towards all proposed alternatives. Preservationists hope one of the design alternatives will be accepted before the final Appeals Court decision. A decision is expected within the next 30 days.

As Rowe says, "there is still time for Wells Fargo to become the hero, and save the building."

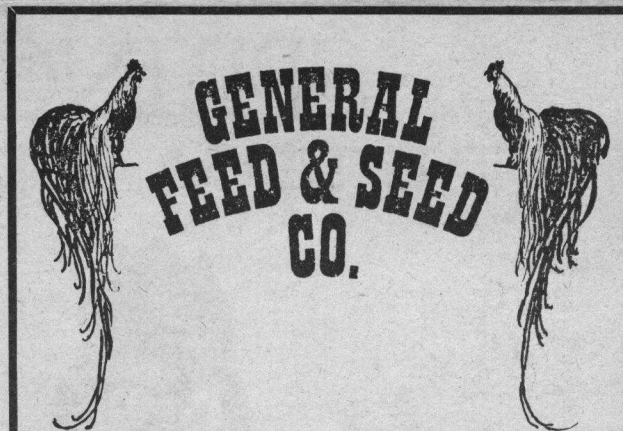
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