

WATSONVILLE
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Arts center proposed for Watsonville building

By **TRACY L. BARNETT**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Janet Johns has been teaching Ballet Folklorico in the Pajaro Valley for 18 years. Her group, Esperanza del Valle, has lived countless community events with color and festivity over the years.

Still, like many other arts and cultural groups around the valley, Esperanza del Valle is homeless. That's why she and others in the community are channeling their artistic talents in a new direction.

It began with the idea to take over the abandoned Pacific Bell building, a stone structure behind the massive Pac Bell building on Rodriguez Street. The old building is ornamented with flowery carvings and sunbursts — mostly obscured by nondescript off-white paint, but definitely begging for artistic attention.

The city is currently negotiating with Pacific Bell to purchase the building to turn it into an arts in-

cubator — part of a plan to energize the area with a cultural corridor featuring creative people, sports events, lush greenery and much, much more foot traffic.

"Until you spend time walking downtown, you don't see all that beauty," said Ann Shelley, gesturing toward the abandoned building. As a technician for Pac Bell, Shelley works in the high rise next door and hopes to watch an evolution in the neighborhood she's grown to love.

"We've got the Chinese grocery across the street, the Filipino Gardens across the way, the Korean Discount Mall and this beautiful landscaped alley," she said. She referred to Stoesser Way, an oasis of explosive red and yellow bougainvillea, singing birds and inviting park benches behind the city parking garage. "I see all this culture in Watsonville that others don't see; but you have to look for it right now. I think we should present it to people. That, to me, is Watsonville."

Shelley was inspired to join the city's new Arts and Culture Center Task Force when she learned that Esperanza del Valle was struggling to find a place to practice. "That just tugged at my heartstrings," she said.

So together with volunteers such as artist Rose Buffalo of Aromas, teacher Jean Thomas, jobs consultant Chris Ballin of Career Services, and longtime arts community leader Eleazar Cortez, Shelley is sitting through meetings talking about things like process and participation, fundraising and mission statements.

"We have to build a case for acquisition of the building," explained project leader Reynaldo Barrios, a visual artist whose background with the performing arts group Arte Latino led him to a staff position with Main Street Watsonville, where he and former city manager Steve Salomon first hit on the idea of an arts incubator.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Ann Shelley says Watsonville has a lively arts community that needs a place such as the abandoned Pacific Bell building behind her to call its own.

Ikuyo Conant of Watsonville Taiko Drummers, another task force member, was excited about the possibilities Thursday as the group toured the darkened building,

which is now used for storage.