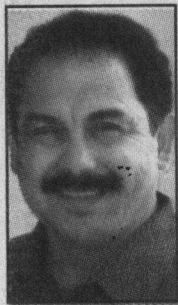


# Watsonville farmers market still struggling

*farmers market*  
Officials seek \$20,000 grant to assist with promotion



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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville's farmers market needs help.

Although the seasonal Peck Street market attracts a dedicated group of shoppers and vendors, the venture has yet to take off. So, as its third season nears, city and market organizers are discussing its future.

The city created the market two years ago to attract more business downtown from May through November. But it is not self-sustaining and has existed on a mix of user fees and city subsidies. No city money is budgeted for the project this year.

## Rios

Some have suggested moving the downtown farmers market, but the city's mayor wants it to stay on Peck Street.

While the market generates enough money to cover operating expenses, there is no money for advertising and other means of drumming up more business.

The City Council voted last week to apply for a \$20,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture rural enterprise grant that would be used to promote the market.

The grant would help pay for ad-

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vertising, create a program for Watsonville High School students to participate in employment training and help the market become a non-profit corporation, said Lea Goodman, market manager.

If the city does not get the grant, market organizers probably will ask the city for the money.

Through promotions, direct mailing and advertisements, Goodman hopes to entice more Watsonville residents to shop at the market. She also plans to target customers in northern Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. Goodman manages four of the county's five farmers' markets.

Jerry Thomas, an organic farmer from Aptos who is a regular vendor at the Watsonville market, said business was better last year than the year before but it is still the smallest of six or seven markets he attends.

Part of the reason could be demographics, said Thomas. Farmers markets do best in affluent urban or suburban areas, he said.

Thomas said the perception that downtown Watsonville is dangerous keeps some people away.

"It's an erroneous perception that people have, but it's there," he said.

Thomas said the market's best bet is to appeal to northern Monterey County. The area is becoming more affluent and there are no farmers markets between Watsonville and Monterey.

In addition to efforts to boost sales, the market is involved with a dispute with Wells Fargo Bank, which is across the street from the market.

On Fridays the city closes Peck Street between Main and Union streets to traffic from 1:30-7 p.m. for the market. But because Friday is a busy day for the bank, Wells Fargo officials want to see the market move.

The parking lot behind St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church and the grassy lot on Main Street next to El Altano restaurant have been suggested as alternatives.

Goodman does not like either site and wants to stay put. The church location defeats the purpose of having the market downtown and the Main Street site is impractical be-



Sentinel file photo

Claudia Blas bags produce at the Watsonville farmers market.

cause farmers would have to unload their produce and carry it onto the grass, she said.

Goodman said since Peck is a public street, Wells Fargo should not be able to call the shots.

"No one business should command that as their territory," she said.

To accommodate the bank, she does not let the vendors set up until 1:30 p.m., so the bank can finish its lunch-time business.

City Council member Judy Doering Nielsen asked that the farmers market issue be pulled from the council's consent agenda last week and placed on the regular agenda so the council can discuss it. Doering Nielsen, senior vice president of San Jose National Bank, was sympathetic to Wells Fargo's complaints about parking and asked the city to examine the Main Street lot as an alternative.

The market used to get promotional assistance from Main Street Watsonville, a downtown business promotion group. Jose Torres, the former president of Main Street Watsonville, said one reason the city stopped financing the association was that members were critical of the market.

"It's badly run, poorly managed and big changes are needed before it's going to be successful," he said.

Torres said holding the market on Sundays would attract more shoppers.

Goodman said she preferred keeping the market on Fridays but is open to discussing other days. But keeping the market on the plaza is critical, she said.

"The plaza is our focal point," she said.

Joe Aliotti has sold fresh fish at the market the last two years. The success of his business spurred him to open a fish market on Main Street. While the farmers market has been good for him, Aliotti said the location lacks parking and is bad for business.

"If it's in the same place this year, I won't participate because it's a waste of time," he said.

He urged the market organizers to move it to St. Patrick's until a permanent location can be found.

"Without parking, people won't come. It's as simple as that," he said.

Mayor Oscar Rios said he is committed to keeping the market where it is.

With the expansion of Cabrillo College, plans to build a new main library and Graniterock's headquarters on Main Street and other developments, downtown Watsonville is the place for the market to be, he said.