

# When 200 Block goes, so does a way of life

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When the bulldozers raze the 200 block of Main Street, sometime this year, they will plow under a way of life along with the walls of brick and corrugated steel.

"I don't know what our people are going to do," said Ramiro Romo, who owns the Jalisco Restaurant at 263 Main St. "There won't be any Hispanics who can afford businesses here and it'll change the character of the whole area."

Under the city's redevelopment plan, Romo's three-year-old restaurant is scheduled to go, and so will the other buildings on the block bounded by First and Second Streets, and Main and Rodriguez Streets.

The property owners and business operators have no choices in the matter under the federal law that governs the redevelopment district, City Attorney Donald Haile said.

City officials, who are working on financing the project, said they aren't sure when the demolition will begin. They have, however, promised fair payment to the owners for their property, and financial assistance of not more than \$10,000 for those who are renting building space and wish to relocate. And to help the displaced merchants, the City Council will retain a specialist in relocating businesses, Haile said.

But the city officials can't promise that when the businesses do move — or just disappear — a way of life won't go with them.

Romo's high-ceilinged restaurant is a place where farm workers come for a hot meal after a day in the fields. And although the names and nationalities of those workers have changed over the decades, they have all been drawn to "Lower

Main" for the same reasons.

"It's kind of sad," Romo's wife, Stella, said. "The agricultural workers who come here feel comfortable. They have this block as their place to come everyday. Everywhere else they go, they feel rejected."

A man in a straw hat stopped to talk to Romo on his way into the restaurant. He wanted his paycheck cashed.

"We cash the checks if we know the people's faces," she said. "Some of them have no identification, so where else could they go?"

For the last 10 years, Stella Romo's family has made a business of catering to the farm workers. The two buildings next door to the Jalisco belong to her parents, Pete and Maria Guadalupe Sanchez.

Maria Guadalupe Sanchez is 53 years old, but her face is deeply lined. She works all the time, she said, while sitting at the orange counter of her restaurant, Playas Novalleras.

"Most people drink, go out and enjoy themselves," she said, laughing so her gold teeth showed. "And I go for walks — from the house to here and back. My children say I will die on those walks."

Sanchez doesn't speak English, and for the most part she doesn't need to. She has few Anglo customers.

Raul Pena comes to Playas Novalleras after work sometimes, because its a quiet place for a beer.

"My Anglo friends here in town are really suspicious (about lower Main Street)," said Pena, a 27-year-old contractor, whose grandparents are from Mexico. "They say, 'How do you go down there, Raul.' And I get them to come here and eat and they think it's a big deal. It satisfies their curiosity, I guess."

Lower Main Street's reputation in greater Watsonville is a source of humor and irritation to many of the business people in the 200 block.

"I tell my white friends, 'Why don't you come down and eat,'" said Rosita Tabasa, owner of the Philippine Gardens Cafe on First Street, which is also slated for demolition. "I tell them, 'Don't worry, the people don't bite.'"

The fear the neighborhood evokes in some of Stella Romo's fellow citizens saddens her.

"It's unfortunate that the Anglos don't feel they can walk around here," she said. "I've never had that problem and I'm a woman."

But, Romo said, newspaper accounts of stabbings and thefts in the downtown area have probably contributed to that perception.

"These things do happen," she said. "This community has a lot of problems, but these (farm) workers don't come here looking for problems. I think the city wants this block out because they think it's bad for the community."

Romo is right, as far as the mayor is concerned.

"My primary goal is to clear up that area," Mayor Ann Soldo said. "Personally, I think there are too many bars and card rooms. I just think there's an over-abundance."

But the bars and card rooms have been a part of the scene on Lower Main for a long time. The Chinese, the Japanese, the Filipinos and the Mexicans have all made merry on Lower Main at one time or another during the last century. And taking away their only recreational outlet would be morally wrong, said Bill Shelton, who is a member of the committee that advises the City Council on

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redevelopment matters.

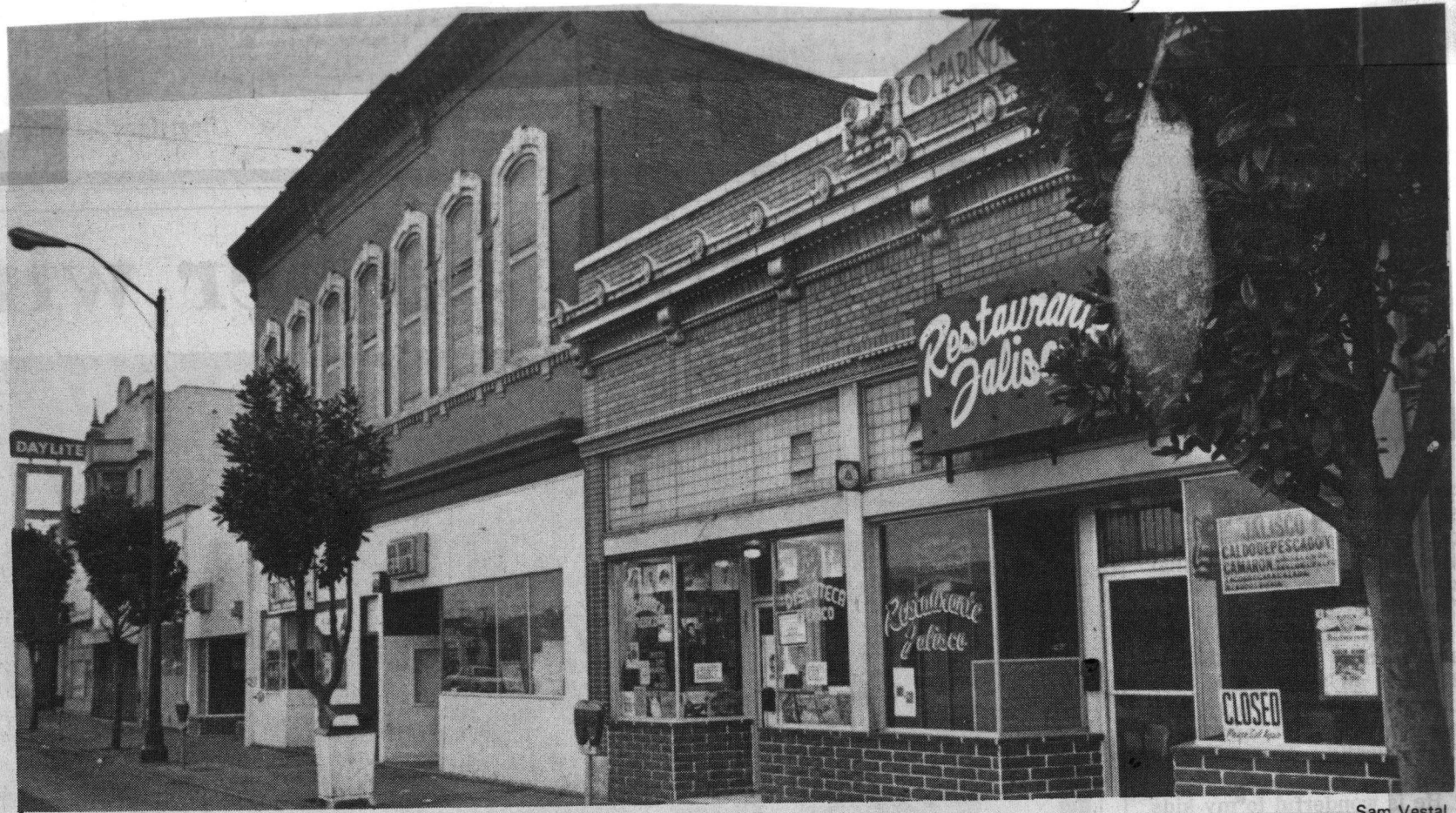
"There is a fundamental social issue which must be resolved if revitalization is to be successful," said Shelton, who directs a non-profit development company. "Instead of us taking a hard look at the issue, we try and make do with technical fixes."

Mayor Soldo, however, argues that it is impractical to consider such concerns, although, she said, they are real enough.

"That's a question we can't answer. It becomes a human problem," she said. "But what you want to look at is our city 20 or 30 years down the road. That's when the return on our redevelopment dollars will come through."

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The mayor said that the City Council would not dictate who bought into the properties the city opens up for development, although she said the displaced businesses will have first crack at purchasing the newly refurbished property.



Sam Vestal

Businesses such as Restaurante Jalisco will be torn down under city redevelopment plan for 200 block.

"The City Council should not regulate private business," Soldo said.

But the land owners on the block in question are having a hard time believing they will come out on top in the deal.

"Why should I buy from the city something that's already mine? Baloney to that," said Anthony Giammanco, whose family owns Anthony's fish market on Rodriguez Street, along with about a quarter of the condemned block.

Dick Wong, owner of Daylite Market, the largest of the businesses that will be displaced, echoed Giammanco's concerns.

"If you had to sell your property and then buy it back at a higher cost, how would you feel," said Wong, whose family has had the Main Street grocery store since the 1950s. "We went in and looked at the city's appraisal of our property and it looked kind of low."

Wong said he was delighted when he first heard about the city's redevelopment plan two years ago. But the higher costs are beginning to scare him.

"We said we'd like to fit in with their (city officials') plans," he said. "But we're

going to have to rebid for our own property, and that doesn't seem fair."

Although he is worried, Wong said he is willing to work with the city.

"I think we could both come out ahead in this deal," he said. "This (the grocery store) is not some big corporation. It's a family business and I just want us to get a fair shake." □

On the other side of the block from Wong, Manuel Gonzales, who owns La Colmena, a bakery and grocery store on Rodriguez Street, said he would also like to see the area upgraded, but he worries about

losing his many Mexican customers.

"Even if we stay in this area, we may have to go higher in our prices, and the people can't afford that," said Gonzales, who has been looking for a place to move to since the demolition plan was announced last fall.

Rosita Tabasa, 72, whose well-established restaurant on First Street is a second home to a large group of retired Filipino field workers, wonders where her customers will go for companionship.

"Do they think we can move our customers like pieces of furniture?" Tabasa asked. "What are we going to do?"

Not all the business people think they will lose customers. Mark Birns, a businessman who sells camping and clothing goods in his family store on Main Street, looks forward to the change.

"It doesn't bother me to move," said Birns, who owns Star Surplus, 247 Main St. "I think the 200 block has to be redeveloped.

"There are shoppers who are nervous to come shopping here because of some of my neighbors — the cantinas (bars)."

But, like most of his neighbors, Birns knows very little about the City Council's timetable for implementing its plan, first adopted in 1973. Amended plans and a suit filed against the city by the county in the intervening years have contributed to holding up the process.

"We don't really have any plans until we see if it does go through," Birns said. "I'm kind of skeptical. I'm just won-

dering if they're going to come up with the money."

A few doors down, some of Birns' neighbors and their customers are hoping for a little more time to enjoy life on Lower Main Street.

"This is like a little Mexico," Ramiro Romo said, looking around his restaurant, decorated with Mexican wall hangings and musicians' sombreros. "I imagine this is what Chinatown in San Francisco is like, and Americans go there. Why shouldn't they come here?"



Sam Vestal

**Maria Guadalupe Sanchez, right, and customers don't have much longer to enjoy Playas Novalleras, which the city plans to knock down.**