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Downtown problems influence council on two proposals

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Long-running problems with alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and crime in the lower Main Street area shaped two decisions made last night by the Watsonville City Council on proposed projects there.

The council approved a permit for the construction of a 10-room farm-worker housing project to replace a building at 73 Union St. that came down after being damaged in the 1989 earthquake.

It rejected an application by Hossein Tabatabai for a permit to sell beer and wine at a proposed mini-mart at a gas station at 153 Main St.

The housing project is being proposed by Marciano Padilla, who was turned down the first time he came to the council with plans for the Union Street parcel. His initial proposal was for a rooming house with a shared kitchen and bathroom, an arrangement similar to the one that had existed before the earthquake, and one that city Police Chief Terry Medina said would lend itself to the same problems with crime, and health and safety code violations.

Medina said that among other things, the shared bathroom was used by prostitutes, drug dealers and addicts, and that the men prepared and cooked food illegally in their rooms.

Current plans call for one-room apartments that would be rented to single men who work in agriculture. Each would contain a bathroom and a kitchenette. A manager would live in the only one-bedroom apartment in the project.

Medina said last night that the new configuration, along with a host of conditions included in the permit that are aimed at monitoring the project, made a difference, and that he supported the project.

Council and staff members agreed that there was a need for farm-worker housing. But some on the council expressed doubts about whether the new design and conditions would really change things.

"Under other circumstances, there'd be wholehearted enthusiastic support for this," said Councilman Todd McFarren, but he said the previous building's "sordid history" had everyone a little worried.

Councilwoman Betty Bobeda said, "I don't feel that changing the design ... is going to eliminate all the problems that were there."

Councilmen Al Alcalá and Lowell Hurst asked whether the city would really be able to enforce its conditions — such as keeping a list of tenants' names, which would be updated every few months and kept by the Planning Department, and making sure no guests spent the night.

Councilman Tony Campos said

he supported the project, but that the council realistically should expect that three or four people, not one, would end up living in each room. He also asked the council whether it would really have the heart to revoke the building permit — which would also mean kicking out all the tenants — if the conditions aren't met.

Other council members said they didn't think farm-worker housing was appropriate for the downtown. They wanted the owner to consider a commercial use instead.

But McFarren said, "We don't need a completely gentrified downtown," a place where "people come to have brunch."

"Farm-worker housing has a place downtown," he said.

Campos said he thought crime should be dealt with through police action, not by placing conditions on housing projects. He asked Medina to increase police presence in the area.

Medina told him officers already spend more time in the lower Main Street area than any other area in town, and members of the South Main Business Association have said they are beginning to see an improvement.

Bobeda, Mayor Oscar Rios and Councilman Parr Eves voted against the project.

In the mini-mart matter, the council, in an attempt to deal with alcohol-related problems, had indicated last year it wanted to phase out businesses that serve alcohol downtown, and directed staff to come up with a program to do so. In a memo to the council, Planning Director Maureen Owens listed 13 establishments within a 500-foot radius of the mini-market that sell alcohol.

Some of the council members seemed to have had a change of heart, however. Hurst and Bobeda were the only ones to mention the abundance of places to buy alcohol as their reasons for opposing the permit.

Councilman Al Alcalá, who was elected last November, said he thought the council was being "too quick to condemn" the mini-market just because some people abuse alcohol.

Rios said he thought it would be inconsistent to allow the housing project, "even though we know what's going to happen (there)" and disallow the alcohol sales.

Campos and McFarren said they were disinclined to allow the beer and wine sales because the owner hadn't complied with some conditions on an earlier permit. McFarren also said there was plenty of evidence that makes a connection between drunk driving and sales of alcohol at gas stations.

The permit was denied 5 to 2, with Alcalá and Rios voting for approval.