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Main Street program 1990 - surveys Watsonville

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Downtown Watsonville has some serious economic troubles.

Few people walking Main Street would argue with that statement. What wasn't destroyed by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake or bulldozed for redevelopment has been shaken by the economic recession or competition from new shopping centers.

Businesses are closing for lack of customers.

The question is, how does Watsonville revitalize the downtown area without destroying

much of the charm, the flavor, the sense of community, that attracted people to the city in the first place?

Merchants hope that a program called Main Street Watsonville — A Downtown Association will provide some of the answers for a bootstrap effort to bring people back to the city's core to shop and just enjoy life.

The city has been named one of five new participants in the California Main Street program, sponsored by the California Department of Commerce and the

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National Main Street Center, an arm of the National Trust for Historic Places.

The other cities are Monterey, Eureka, Dinuba and Turlock.

Yesterday and today, two people — Keith E. Kjelstrom, the state coordinator, and Lynn Bowness, of the National Main Street Center — have been touring the city, meeting and talking with local business owners, city officials, property owners and the public.

Volunteers will be invited to a seminar Nov. 8 at the Asilomar Conference Center to meet with Main Street officials and leaders of other communities involved in the ongoing project.

A public meeting last night was sparsely attended. Only a dozen people turned out at the Marinovich Community Center.

"It's not a gigantic group, but it is a start," observed Kjelstrom, seemingly shrugging off the poor turnout.

The Main Street program, which is active in more than 700 communities nationwide and 31 in California, is based on four points: organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring.

"The goal is to revitalize the downtown in a comprehensive way," Kjelstrom said.

It takes a lot of time — and hard work — to turn a Main Street around and make it viable again, Kjelstrom and Bowness told the audience last night.

"To change customers' shopping patterns takes at least a year," Bowness said, quoting a survey by American Demographics, a research firm.

"This is not a glitzy program," she added. There is no magic formula that the National Main Street Center packages and delivers to a community. The proposals are tailored to each community, and Watsonville will

have to come up with its own answers, but with a lot of help from the Main Street team, Bowness said.

The team wanted to know two things last night: What features of the downtown area should not be changed, and, five years down the road, what people would like to see.

The list of "untouchables" was topped by the Plaza. No one at the Marinovich meeting wanted to see the Plaza altered as the focus of the downtown business area.

Others on the "don't change" list were Taylor's hot dog stand, the many historic buildings, the trees, the cornices, St. Patrick's Church, Radcliffe School, the mortuaries, the Mansion House, the Jalisco restaurant, the Del Monte restaurant, the Miramar Grill, the airport, the World War I memorial and the memorial park, the wetlands and sloughs, and the view corridor down Main Street to the hills in Monterey County.

Audience members were then asked what they would like to see if they left town and came back five years later.

The answers were as varied as the audience:

An explosion of color, said one audience member. The diverse, ethnic community should be brought together, said another.

Other ideas included a vital 200 block, a variety of businesses downtown, a second bridge over the Pajaro River as another entrance or gateway into town, preservation and restoration of the many Victorian homes in the city, and the return of passenger train service through Watsonville to Santa Cruz.

Other ideas included converting surplus warehouses into residential living space, turning the old Southern Pacific railway depot into a commercial center and moving people back into the downtown area as residents — possibly into apartments over ground-floor shops.