

Watsonville's improvement more than a facade

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WATSONVILLE — Picture magenta bougainvilleas climbing lattices, dwarf Magnolia trees circled with bright red blooming cyclamen, planter boxes brimming with rainbow-colored geraniums among a series of courtyards.

Today, black asphalt and the backs of buildings is the picture you see; but that is going change.

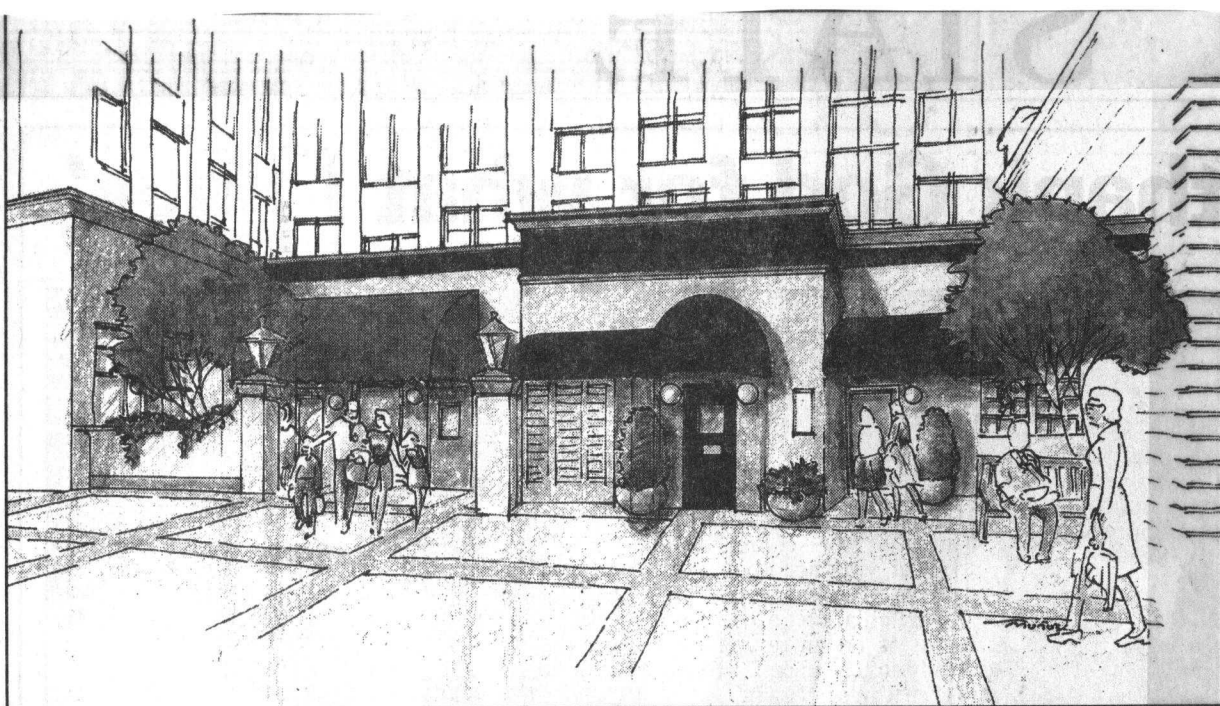
Another phase of the city's Downtown Marketplace plan is about to get into motion on the 400 block behind Main Street where those buildings will get a face lift. In addition, the city is in the final design stages of revamping the 180-slot parking lot.

The owners of the Lettunich Building, Mansion House, Taylor's Office Supply and John's Shoes are getting funds — up to \$10,000 per storefront — through the city's facade loan program to make improvements. The Kalich Building is undergoing major renovation, and a facade is in the plans.

"We are anxious to get our building painted and the back of the store redesigned to be more attractive," said Scott Taylor of Taylor's Office Supply and president of Main Street Watsonville, the downtown business organization that helped create the plan along with guidance from the city.

Two years ago, Zarko Radich, who has been selling smokes and making sandwiches for 18 years at Jack's Cigar Store, was the first business owner downtown to take advantage of the city's improvement plan.

Gone is asphalt that previously surrounded his two-story structure, replaced by an enclosed area with trees, landscaping and lighting. Tables and chairs have been added for customers, making the courtyard a popular downtown



The Lettunich Building facade in, as envisioned by an architect.

destination.

"This was a team effort," Radich said of his project, which cost \$44,000. He replaced a worn-out awning, installed wooden lattices, painted the buildings and rebuilt a redwood staircase with \$12,000 he got from the city.

Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bob Dwyer said of work: "It's one of the more beautiful things to happen downtown." The chamber and city each contributed \$8,000, and Radich paid the difference of \$24,000.

The hope is to create an inviting walking district for shopping and business in the central business corridor. The centerpiece of the plan is the downtown plaza. As the report said: "If in Italy all roads lead to Rome, then in Watsonville all paths should lead to the Plaza."

The pending improvements also include pathways and alleys. To fulfill the promise of an active, inviting pedestrian route through downtown, the following components had to be addressed:

- Parking: The parking lot in the 400 block of 180 spaces is critical

for downtown, especially with Cabrillo College expansion on the horizon. Because of patchwork of city and private ownership, the lot was not laid out efficiently. The city plans to improve it, and at the same time help the flow of foot traffic and add loading zones.

- Pathways: There no clear paths for pedestrians through the parking areas, or paths connecting Main Street and the surrounding areas. The mid-block crossing on Main Street connects directly to the parking area in the 400 block through Taylor's Alley. This connection will significantly improve with lighting, paving, drainage and facade improvement.

- The backs of buildings appear unused and rundown, and most have no customer access. Property owners are using the facade funding to improve rear access to draw more customers.

- Trash. Unscreened trash dumpsters will disappear behind enclosures.

Nancy Moore Wright, special project manager for the city's redevelopment agency, has been convincing owners that improving

their properties is worth it. "This is a pretty inexpensive way to update their buildings," she said.

Property owners have to repay only half of the loan amount, interest free, if their property is properly maintained. The other half of the loan is forgiven. "It's our money that's been reinvested in the downtown to increase our tax revenue," Taylor said.

The facade program is another step in the revitalization of the downtown. Other parts of the plan already in place are the Friday afternoon Farmer's Market, planning for the expansion of Cabrillo College's South County campus on Union Street and a sign ordinance, also with loans available for property owners.

When the plan is complete, Watsonville will be the "San Antonio Riverwalk without the river," said Charles Eadie of the city's Community Services Department.

New facade, courtyard and parking improvements in the 400 block should be complete by fall.

For more information regarding the city's facade or sign loan programs, call 728-6014.