

Watsonville program focuses on growing Latino market

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WATSONVILLE — The typical shopper in downtown Watsonville is a Latino male between 25 and 34 whose family earns less than \$20,000 a year, according to a recent survey of 79 downtown business owners.

The survey results, released by a downtown improvement program, were no surprise to leaders of Main Street Watsonville, a volunteer program created in 1992 to revitalize and improve the city's core. But this group hopes downtown business owners will now know who their customers are and will be encouraged to focus on a growing Latino market.

"Look at this town," said Joe Moreno, a longtime businessman and Main Street board member, motioning to a near-empty sidewalk Tuesday at noon. "(Anglo shoppers) have spoken with their feet and their money. They aren't here."

Main Street leaders say the



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survey is part of a long-range plan to market to the region's strongest consumer group.

"This is part of niche marketing not meant to be divisive or discriminatory at all — it is a logical approach at segmenting the larger market, where the opportunities exist," said Jerry Hernandez, executive director of Main Street Watsonville. "If done right, we think it'd have a flavor everyone would be proud of."

Friday and Saturday after-

noons are the strongest shopping times downtown, and Hernandez and others say that Sunday would be the busiest shopping day if downtown business owners heeded nationwide trends in similar areas with a large agricultural workforce. Meanwhile, Main Street leaders are gearing up for a weekly farmers market and a quarterly street fair, favored by more than 70 percent of the respondents.

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Main Street program

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One of downtown's newest shops, the 99 Cent Store, has been bustling with business since it opened a month ago, selling items including hair ribbons, earrings, lotions, deodorant, and condoms for less \$1.

"More than anything else, this shop attracts Latinos. There haven't been many Anglos," said worker Marivel Fernandez, who spoke Spanish to store customers.

A few doors down is John's Shoes, a downtown staple for 75 years passed down to three generations. The shop's focus is women over 45 who like to be waited on, a market maintained amid the changing demographics, with no changes planned.

John's Shoes owner Don Henrichsen hadn't seen the survey, but he said he doesn't believe suggestions like a setting up a Spanish-speaking open-air market will do much to bolster downtown sales because many people who would be attracted earn low wages in the fields and return to Mexico after the harvest.

But Main Street leaders say the future downtown will attract a large, middle-class Latino population that's largely ignored.

"It doesn't mean the Latino market is monolithic — they are the new middle class," Hernandez said.

Downtown owners surveyed seemed most concerned with attracting businesses, any businesses, that draw people downtown. Of those surveyed, 41 percent said that the variety of goods and services offered downtown was "poor."

While shopping centers have been slowly cropping up around the city's perimeter — the Crossroads shopping center, Watsonville Square and Pajaro

Hill near Main Street and Green Valley Road and the Kmart shopping center on Freedom Boulevard — the city's core remains without a major grocery store and has few clothing outlets.

Many surveyed blamed the sluggish downtown economy on the closure of Ford's department store in 1993. Henrichsen and others said finding a tenant for the vacant 80,000-square-foot building in the center of town was key to attracting businesses downtown.

"Since the close of Ford's, we really haven't had much of a downtown," Henrichsen said.

Downtown business watchers say Ford's lost the local market even before they had to rebuild following the 1989 earthquake, when they hired a Nordstrom's consultant to appeal to an upscale market.

"If you learn anything from Ford's, it's when they were marketing to our blue-collar market,

Downtown profile

A new survey of downtown Watsonville businesses offers a picture of what's available now and what changes might attract more customers. Among the findings:

- **Type:** retail, 40 percent; non-profit, banks, educational services, 25 percent; professional, 15 percent; food, 10 percent; personal services, 8 percent; and entertainment: 2 percent.

- **Staff:** 90 percent have bilingual personnel.

- **Longevity:** Almost 40 percent are more than 10 years old, 25 percent between five and nine years, and 34 percent have opened since the 1989 earthquake.

- **Ownership:** 44 percent Anglo; 30 percent Mexican or Latino; 10 percent Asian. And 62 percent rent, while 38 percent own.

- **When customers shop:** Almost half the businesses said their busiest time is between 4 and 6 p.m. The popular shopping day is Friday, followed by Saturday, but some say Sunday would be busiest if more stores were open.

- **Prospects:** 36 percent of businesses improved sales over the past two years; 28 percent decreased; 27 percent reported stable sales. A sizable number, 63 percent, do not intend to expand their business in the next three years.

they were successful," Hernandez said. "It's nothing to be ashamed about. That's what this country is all about — you have a good, solid family base here that's proud of its community."

Several other business owners said they were worried about graffiti scarring downtown buildings, and about safety and gang warfare. While 33 percent said safety downtown was good, another 30 percent said it was fair, and 25 percent said it was poor.

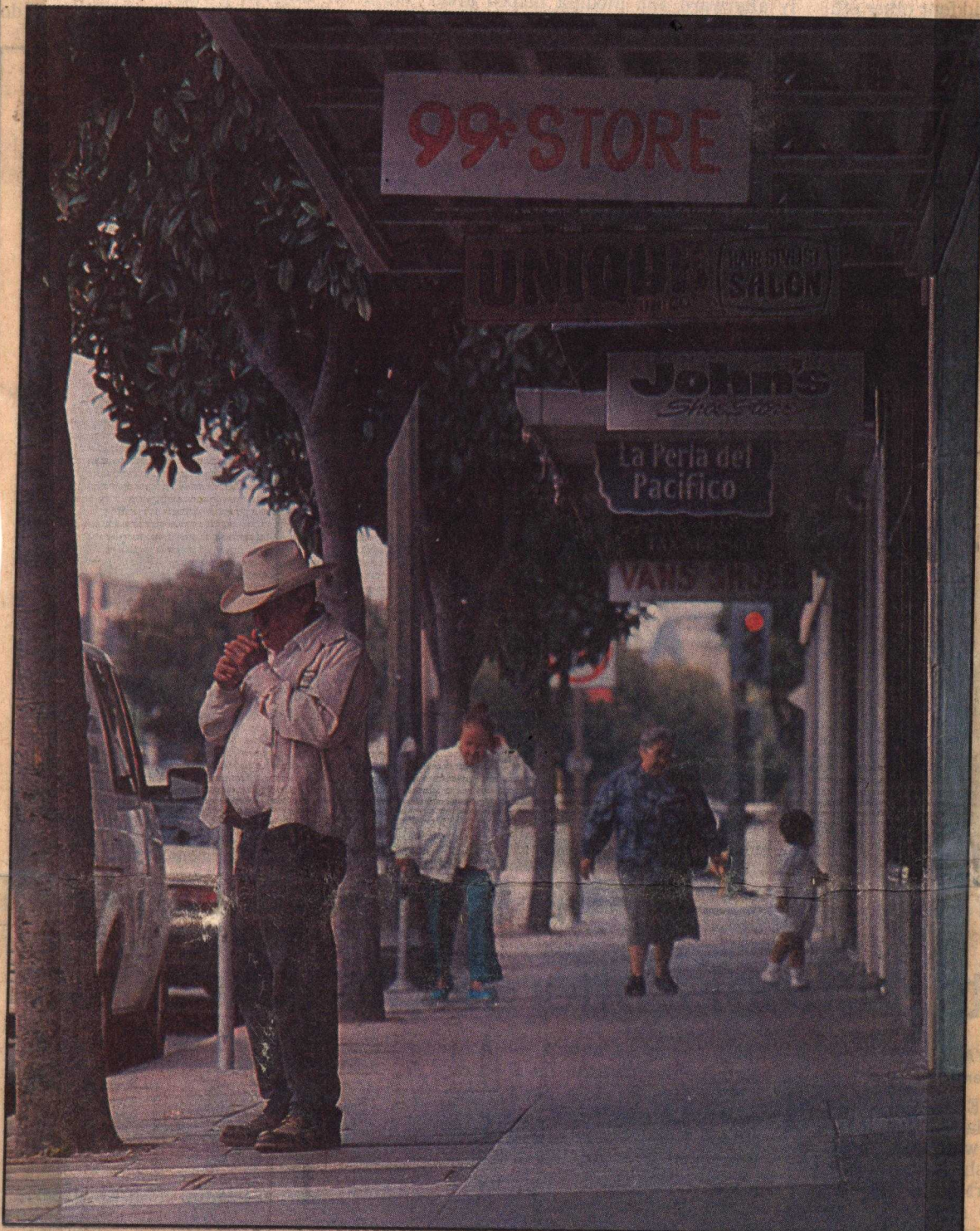
The "downtown" area surveyed is bordered by St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church to the north, the Pajaro River to the south, Rodriguez Street to the west and Union, Carr and Brennan streets to the east. Of the 280 businesses surveyed in that area, the 29 percent who responded were more than double the amount needed for a representative sample, said Hernandez.

1990-2000



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Older, established businesses mix with the successful 99 Cent Store downtown.