

Have consultants finally given downtown the spark it needs?

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

The long-awaited reports on Watsonville's central business district unveiled last week are thorough, methodical and, in parts, imaginative. But will they help bring about the "new" downtown wistfully envisioned by so many Pajaro Valley residents?

The economic report by Keyser-Marston paints a picture of a city center that is, if not robust, at least alive, and with plenty of potential — which is more than can be said about a lot of downtowns in California and across the country. The report warns, however, that something must be done to reverse the growing inclination of Pajaro Valley people to go elsewhere to shop. The amount of sales going outside the valley, the consultants estimate, is about 25 per cent, and that is expected to rise to 35 per cent when the most "eminent" challenge to the downtown — the 41st Ave. mall — is complete.

The economic consultants and the traffic and parking consultants agree on one major point: the heavy traffic on Main St. has got to go. One of the suggestions is to use Rodriguez St. as a highway for the west side, and Brennan, Alexander and Union Sts. (after the latter two are "realigned" at Beach Sts.) as the east side "traffic corridor." The traffic consultants went so far as to suggest that one possibility would be to block off the north and south ends of Main St. to prevent drivers as using it as a "through road."

It is particularly heartening that the traffic consultants concluded taking the route of the state highway off Main St. would help the downtown. Most redevelopment advocates, especially the Citizens Advisory

Committee for downtown revitalization, have insisted that taking down the "152" signs was essential for redevelopment. But City Manager Ron Bartels has said there was a chance that the experts would decide that making Main St. "pedestrian-oriented" would do more harm than good. Thus, a potential split between citizens here and the traffic experts seems to have been avoided.

Analysis

The reports probably couldn't have been completed at a better time. A new sense of urgency (perhaps impatience) has developed among downtown merchants and members of the citizens committee. This was manifested Tuesday night when the committee chairman, Roger Hoffman, showed his displeasure when Mayor Bill Johnston suggested that the consultants come back to answer questions "in 30 to 45 days" so that city officials and other concerned persons could "absorb" the reports. Hoffman told Johnston he was worried about the delay, particularly that the council's upcoming budget sessions would postpone any serious discussion of redevelopment. "Why don't we set the meeting for April 19?" he asked the mayor. Johnston responded by saying it might be a good idea to see (at the budget hearings) how the city stands financially before leaping head first into a revitalization project.

After the meeting, Hoffman said he was concerned that redevelopment might be "put off" as it has "so many times in the past."

"There's no reason it (the next meeting)

couldn't be held in two weeks," he remarked. "There's just no point to sit on it."

If the council catches the drift of the economic report, it will probably want to move with deliberate haste. The report points out that Santa Cruz County is growing so rapidly that it is "attracting the attention of retailers" not already in the market. Says the report: "Many of the major chains such as Macy's, Emporium and Liberty House are not in the Santa Cruz County market at all and others such as Penney's and Ward's are 'underbuilt.' While there are no planned shopping centers ready to move ahead to construction as yet, there is a possibility that a new center could be announced over the next several years."

The implication is clear: The downtown merchants and city officials would be missing out on a golden opportunity to grab a share of the growing market if they drag their feet. One more shopping center, in addition to the 41st Ave. mall, could be extremely dangerous to the downtown's health. If what the consultants say is true — that a market might exist within the next few years for yet another shopping center — the downtown merchants here might be able to convince entrepreneurs that investing in a revitalized city core is better than placing their bets on the success of another shopping mall.

Another auspicious sign has been the tidying-up of Main St. in recent months. All along city officials have been saying that the property owners downtown must provide much of the financial impetus, or else expensive public improvements would prove futile. The recent improvements on

Main St. have clearly demonstrated how a little cosmetic work, sometimes as simple as a few cans of paint, can turn an eyesore into a handsome building.

But what about the public improvements? Can the city afford them?

The prospect, according to city Finance Director John Radin, is not encouraging. At present, Radin says, about \$50,000 a year is filtering into the redevelopment kitty. But, the finance director points out that "the rule of thumb is that you can finance a (redevelopment) project roughly equal to one-tenth of the amount coming in each year." In other words, the city right now can only afford a \$500,000 project, says Radin, who notes that that amount would barely cover the costs of connecting Union and Alexander Sts., a project which is necessary to get the traffic off Main St. Radin says that by the end of this fiscal year, there will be approximately \$207,000 in the redevelopment coffers, but that money, he contends, will probably have to be used for "start-up" costs.

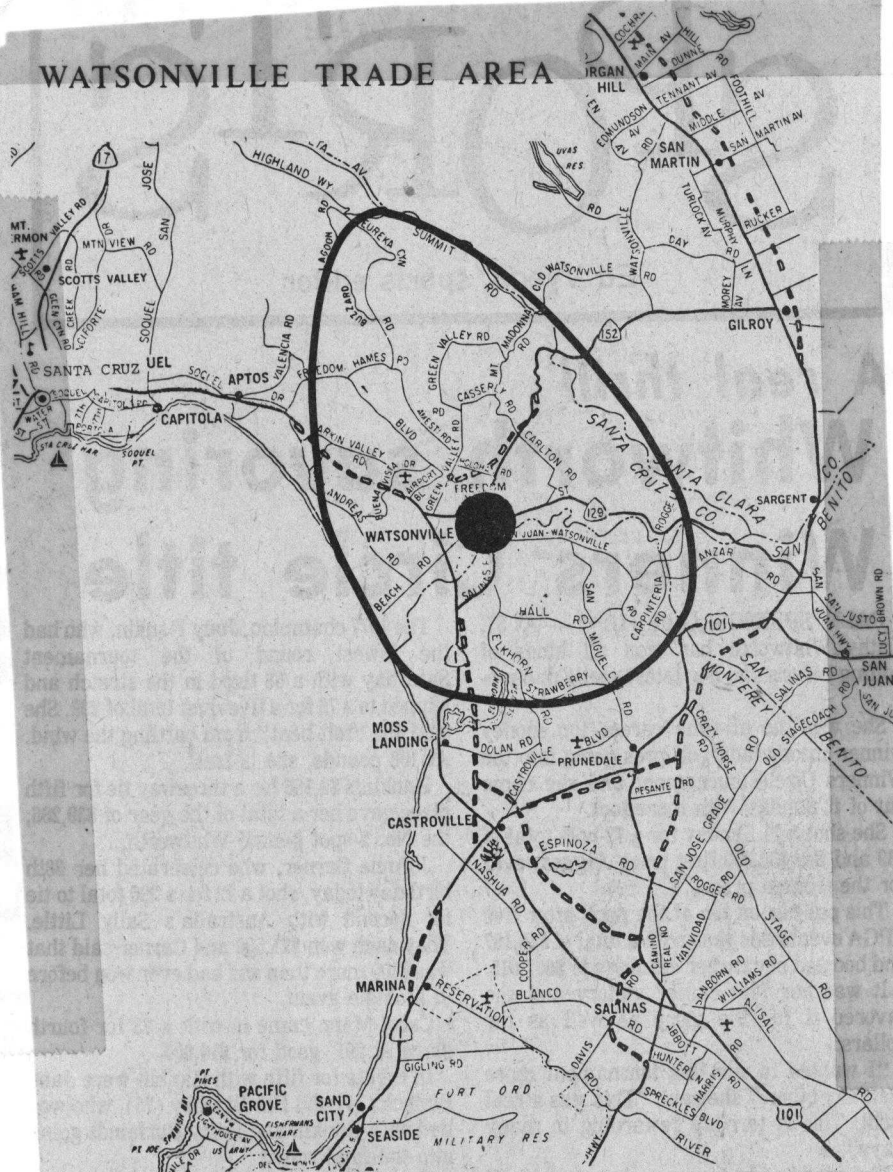
Clearly, city officials will have to look into other forms of financing. The council, of course, could elect to dip into funds used for other purposes (e.g., the sales tax reserve fund used mostly for capital improvements). But the city's budget in recent years has been approaching one of austerity — even without the council having to worry about redevelopment.

Planning Director Bob Ellenwood feels that a specific downtown plan "could be ready by this time next year." But obviously that won't solve the problem of a lack of money. Comments Radin: "We've got a long way to go."

REFERENCE

1976-1985
Planning
WATSONVILLE

WATSONVILLE TRADE AREA



Economic consultants who have studied Watsonville have designated the circled region above as the downtown merchants' "trade area." The experts say 25 per cent of potential sales in the downtown are being "exported" to shopping centers outside the trade area.