

Planning  
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# Post office plan worries new Watsonville council

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WATSONVILLE — Concerns about traffic and the wisdom of putting the new post office downtown led a divided City Council Tuesday to write the U.S. Postal Service for more details about its plans.

But the council stopped short of seeking to delay the project, which is going out to bid Thursday. City Manager John Radin said the construction bids are expected to be awarded within 60 days, indicating the project is on the verge of being built.

Acting as the Redevelopment Agency, the council voted 4-3 to seek more details about the post office's plans for the 200 block of Main Street.

The city sold the 3.65-acre parcel to the Postal Service three years ago for \$1,725,000 as part of an ambitious plan to redevelop lower Main Street. The other part of the 200 block has been sold to San Jose developer Barry Swenson for a commercial center.

The Postal Service's plans call for building a \$5 million, 25,000-square-foot building, with plans to expand in the future into an additional 10,000 square feet. The building will replace the 11,000 square-foot Spanish-style post office at Union and Maple streets.

Although endorsed by the previous City Council, the project has been controversial from inception because it displaced some 29 mom-and-pop stores and restaurants.

Led by councilmen Parr Eves and Oscar Rios, the new council opened discussion on the sticky issue of why the previous City Council approved the sale in the first place.

"Even though the deal is already done, I still think we should make an appeal to the post office not to build here," Rios said.

He said the area of Main, Rodriguez and Riverside streets is congested enough already, and that an expanded post office will worsen the problem.

Eves had a long list of concerns about the redevelopment project.

"I really have some problems

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— Councilman Oscar Rios

with this," Eves began. He suggested the council seek to delay the project until the downtown recovery committee has a chance to come up with its plans for the overall plan to rebuild downtown.

"We had an earthquake, and now there are lots of people who want to come downtown and build," Eves said.

He suggested the council visualize what the property will look like, with one-sixth of the property containing a building and the rest being concrete.

"It won't be much different than what we're looking at now," he said.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy, a strong proponent of the plan, argued the post office is a major draw for people. She reminded the council that "no one was standing at the door waiting to develop the 200 block, and the proof of that is the 100 block that's remained empty ... since the 1960s."

A majority of the council agreed it was probably too late to stop the post office, but they felt more information was needed to integrate the project with the rest of downtown.

"I feel the need to get on with this 200 block," said Councilman Lowell Hurst. "My personal thought is the post office will bring redevelopment and renewal to downtown."

Mayor Todd McFarren asked if the council wanted to re-open the "threshold question" of whether it was a good idea to place the post office on the 200 block. When he didn't get any agreement on that, he suggested Eves devise a motion for a letter.

Murphy objected to the letter on the grounds that it may send the "wrong message" to the U.S. Postal Service and kill the project altogether.

"There's a tremendous amount of competition for these projects," she said. "I'm afraid a letter ... will send the wrong message."

The majority on the council said they didn't think a letter would harm the project.

Eves, Rios, McFarren, and Hurst voted to send the letter. Murphy, Paul Milladin and Johnny Kacsmatyk opposed it.

In separate action, the council voted to enter negotiations to buy the site of the old Canada Shoe Store, which was demolished because of the earthquake. The purchase will allow the city to align Second and Main streets with the intersection across the street, at Maple and Main streets.