



Irwin Ortiz &lt;irwin.ortiz@cityofwatsonville.org&gt;

## City Council Meeting Tonight - Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan - Detailed Comments and Feedback from Ow Family Properties

1 message

**Benjamin Ow** <benjaminmow@gmail.com>

Tue, Oct 25, 2022 at 11:13 AM

To: citycouncil@cityofwatsonville.org, cityclerk@cityofwatsonville.org, cdd@cityofwatsonville.org, Jane Royer Barr <jane.barr@edenhousing.org>, Janneke Strause <director@bikesantacruzcounty.org>, mariaelena@cabinc.org, Aurelio Gonzalez <aurelio.gonzalez@cityofwatsonville.org>, neva@pacificcoastdevelopment.com, Felipe Hernandez <felipe.hernandez.hold@cityofwatsonville.org>, sluna@csumb.edu, Benjamin Ow <benjaminmow@gmail.com>, William Ow <williamgeorgeow@gmail.com>, Shaz Roth <shaz@pajarovalleychamber.com>, "Brian Spector (brians@spectorcorbett.com)" <brians@spectorcorbett.com>, jveitcholson@gmail.com, City Manager <citymanager@cityofwatsonville.org>, Suzi Merriam <suzi.merriam@cityofwatsonville.org>, Justin Meek <Justin.meek@cityofwatsonville.org>, Ivan Carmona <ivan.carmona@cityofwatsonville.org>, Sarah Wikle <sarah.wikle@cityofwatsonville.org>, "deborah.muniz" <deborah.muniz@cityofwatsonville.org>, carlos.landaverry@cityofwatsonville.org, Maria Esther Rodriguez <maria.esther.rodriguez@cityofwatsonville.org>, Murray Fontes <murray.fontes@cityofwatsonville.org>, doug.hessing@dot.ca.gov, John.Olejnik@dot.ca.gov, simran@raimiassociates.com, jasmine@raimiassociates.com, christian@raimiassociate.com, peter@sargenttownplanning.com, andrew@sargenttownplanning.com, bsigman@epsys.com, mweir@nelsonnygaard.com, zzabel@nelsonnygaard.com, mho@nelsonnygaard.com, "Venter, Frederik" <frederik.venter@kimley-horn.com>, jnguyen@bkf.com

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October 25, 2022

RE: Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan

Dear Watsonville City Council,

This letter follows up on my letter sent via email on July 12, 2022 regarding the Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan dated June 2022 (the "Specific Plan"). In that letter, I expressed my and my family's concerns regarding a number of issues with the publicly released draft of the Specific Plan. Ahead of tomorrow's meeting, and without having seen an updated version of the Specific Plan, we'd like to reiterate some of those points.

If the following issues have not already been addressed, the following changes be made to the Specific Plan: continue to allow industrial uses (including heavy industrial and manufacturing) in the Industrial Zone as a principally permitted use; allow thrift stores and antique shops in the Downtown Core as principally permitted uses that don't require a AUP or SUP; allow Dwelling Units and Office uses on the ground floor of the Downtown Core; reduce the amount of required parking in the Specific Plan; increase allowable building heights in the Specific Plan area (especially the Downtown Core); and change the Standards in general to be less specific and allow more flexibility, which is needed for the Specific Plan to be effective and more valuable over the long term as styles, needs, customs, the marketplace, and the entire community changes.

In our previous letter and at public meetings, we have stated the need to allow industrial uses to remain as principally permitted uses in the Industrial Zone. Other stakeholders concurred and planning staff seemed to agree as well. We hope that this means that the Specific Plan will be amended to reflect this. The industrial uses in the Industrial Zone provide incredibly important jobs and other benefits to the City. It's important that the jobs remain in the City by not prohibiting those uses or making them impracticable by a long, expensive permitting process. Please ensure that the Specific Plan allows for industrial uses in the Industrial Zone.

Thrift stores and antique stores should be allowed within the Downtown Core as principally permitted uses that don't require an AUP or SUP. City residents and other stakeholders overwhelmingly shared their feelings that thrift stores and antique stores should be allowed in the Downtown Core.

Planning staff seemed noncommittal during public meetings. We hope that, especially as it appears we are headed into a recession, the City does not prevent uses downtown, such as these thrift stores and antique stores, that provide jobs and goods at reasonable prices

We would also like to reiterate our request to allow dwelling units and office uses on the ground floor in the Downtown Core. The demand for retail space continues to decrease so we need to provide more flexibility on what uses can be on the ground floor so that there are not tons of empty storefronts like there are in many downtowns throughout the region.

We would also like to once again respectfully request that less parking is required throughout the Specific Plan. We continue to believe that it would be a mistake for the City of Watsonville to require more parking per unit as a minimum in housing developments than the State allows as a maximum per unit for housing developments that meet bonus density requirements.

Please direct planning staff to increase the maximum heights/stories of buildings within the Downtown Core. Allowing taller buildings would allow more housing, affordability, jobs, and sustainability. The Downtown Core is a relatively small area. The City is already constrained from further development horizontally because of County land and farm land. Please do not further constrain its ability to grow vertically. Please allow for taller buildings in the Specific Plan.

Please also direct planning staff to amend the "Standards" section of the Specific Plan to allow for more flexibility. Some specific items that we believe need to be changed include: 100% front street buildout should not be required for the Downtown Core or 70% for Downtown Industrial (standards should be lower and allow more flexibility); in the Downtown Industrial Zone more than 70 feet of surface parking frontage should be allowed; building heights should not be limited to 6 stories in the Downtown Core; Massing Increments should not be required and/or they should be loosened greatly; the Façade Design requirements are way too restrictive and should be loosened [all new buildings should NOT be required to reflect the historic patterns and sensibilities of the past (having a formulaic approach will make buildings more homogenous and less interesting)], the Façade Materials requirements need to be significantly loosened [e.g., rather than mandating that heavier materials "must be used below the lighter material (e.g. brick below siding, not vice versa), the City should have fewer requirements and allow for creative and attractive designs]; modifications are needed to allow Retail/Housing Flex, Ground Floor Office, Ground Floor Residential, and Vehicular Access in the Main Street Overlay; and the Shopfronts section should be modified to allow businesses more flexibility (even if that means allowing an interior layout that does not provide full visibility into the interior of the space).

We appreciate all of the time and effort that has been put into the Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan so far. Based on public meetings and outreach with important stakeholders, we believe there is a strong and growing consensus for our positions, which will help allow for the best version of Watsonville: happy, healthy, and vibrant. We respectfully request that the important changes requested in this letter are made to the Specific Plan to support the existing businesses and residents within the Specific Plan area now and also provide an adaptable platform for future growth and development. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

George Ow, Jr., Benjamin Ow, William Ow, Andrew Ow, and 30+ other family members associated with Ow Family Properties

VIA EMAIL

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Benjamin Ow | Principal

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On Tue, Jul 12, 2022 at 2:30 PM Benjamin Ow <[benjaminmow@gmail.com](mailto:benjaminmow@gmail.com)> wrote:

Ow Family Properties  
1601 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Suite 202  
Capitola, CA 95010

July 12, 2022

RE: Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan

Dear Watsonville City Council and Watsonville Planning Commission,

This letter is on behalf of Ow Family Properties regarding the public draft of the Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan dated June 2022 (the “Specific Plan”). Ow Family Properties owns multiple properties that are within the Specific Plan’s area, including properties specifically listed as within Opportunity Sites. While we appreciate the significant amount of time and energy that has been put into the draft so far, we write with some significant concerns about the Specific Plan as it is currently drafted. Our concerns are both about how the Specific Plan will affect current people and businesses within the Specific Plan area and how the Specific Plan could affect future development. We respectfully request that important changes are made to the Specific Plan that will allow it to support and enhance the existing business owners, employees, residents, property owners, and stakeholders within the Specific Plan boundaries, while offering flexibility and new opportunities for the area moving forward. As currently written, we believe the Specific Plan will harm many successful locally owned and operated businesses. We formally request that the following changes to the Specific Plan be made, which include, but are not limited to: allow thrift stores and antique shops in the Downtown Core as principally permitted uses that don’t require a AUP or SUP; allow Dwelling Units and Office uses on the ground floor of the Downtown Core, continue to allow industrial uses (including heavy industrial and manufacturing) in the Industrial Zone; reduce the amount of required parking in the Specific Plan; increase allowable building heights in the Specific Plan area (especially the Downtown Core); and change the Standards in general to be less specific and allow more flexibility, which is needed for the Specific Plan to be effective and more valuable over the long term as styles, needs, customs, the marketplace, and the entire community changes.

Thrift stores and antique stores should be allowed within the Downtown Core as principally permitted uses that don’t require an AUP or SUP. Significant fears of Watsonville residents identified throughout the Specific Plan, including and especially the Appendix, and the public hearings regarding the Specific Plan are displacement and gentrification. Prohibiting antique stores and thrift stores will increase gentrification and displacement because it prevents residents from having access to lower priced goods. This is inappropriate at any time but especially now when inflation is a major problem locally, nationally, and globally. The proposed prohibition is also bad for the environment. Despite the Specific Plan’s goal of sustainability, preventing thrift and antique stores is not pro sustainability or good for the environment, as new items are much more environmentally impactful than used ones. Using and reusing clothing and other goods is much better for the environment than buying new ones. Also, to the extent that the Specific Plan wants to prohibit antique or thrift stores in an attempt to make Downtown Watsonville more “upscale,” which we believe would be misguided, we still don’t believe that the prohibition on antique stores and thrift stores is appropriate. Plenty of thriving upscale downtown areas have thrift and antique stores, including local standouts Santa Cruz and Monterey, as well as major cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Furthermore, the definition of “antique store” is so broad that it could prevent uses like art galleries if the art galleries do not focus on contemporary art work or jewelry shops that do not sell mostly new jewelry. Preventing antique and thrift stores from being in the Downtown Specific Plan Area could also negatively affect a number of existing businesses and many employees. We strongly believe that there should not be a prohibition against antique and thrift stores in the Downtown

Core and having this language in the Specific Plan goes directly against the wishes of many community members who have voiced their opinion throughout the Specific Plan process. At the very least, all existing stores in the Downtown Core should be allowed to remain and future antique stores and thrift stores should be allowed pursuant to an Administrative Use Permit.

The Specific Plan is too inflexible on what is allowed on the ground floor within the Downtown Core. We believe dwelling units and office uses should be allowed on the ground floor. The demand for retail space continues to decrease; we need to build in more flexibility on what uses can be on the ground floor so that there are not tons of empty storefronts like there are in many downtowns throughout the region. It is common for office-like uses such as real estate offices, insurance company offices, medical offices, and others to be on the ground floor of buildings in downtown settings throughout the region. Further, there are plenty of ways that dwelling units on the ground floor can be incorporated into buildings without negatively impacting the streetscape. Similarly, if we have a great company like Driscoll's that wants to locate their headquarters in the Downtown Core, they should be allowed to have their office use on the ground floor (similar to Looker in Santa Cruz) as a principally permitted use.

The Industrial Zone is just that: an industrial zone. Accordingly, industrial uses, including manufacturing, must be principally permitted within it now and moving forward. The Downtown Industrial Zone has many dozens of thriving locally owned and operating businesses that have been successfully operating in their locations for decades. They pour their blood, sweat, and tears into their craft and manufacture and produce all types of products, from metal fabrication, to tea bags, to high end woodwork, to loaves of bread, and everything in between. Many of these tenants are in industrial buildings that we own. Kicking out existing uses, as the current language seemingly does, and/or preventing new industrial businesses who pay well from locating in the Downtown Industrial Zone would be a mistake for Watsonville and a tragedy for its residents. Many local companies do manufacturing and assembly that Watsonville would be lucky to attract, including companies such as Santa Cruz Bicycles, Ibis Bicycles, and Joby Aviation. A blanket prohibition on heavy industrial and manufacturing will be overly restrictive on current users and potential future users. Current heavy industrial and manufacturing uses must be permitted and similar future potential uses should also be principally permitted and not require an AUP or SUP. The idea of expanding uses within the Industrial Zone is positive, but the new uses, such as housing, should be required to "fit in" to the Industrial Zone; the existing and future businesses within the Industrial Zone should not have to move or change their use to accommodate the new uses the Specific Plan contemplates. As such, the Specific Plan must be modified so that it is clear that existing industrial uses will be allowed and supported. New uses should have to adapt to the existing uses/zoning, not the other way around. It is wrong to discourage and/or negatively impact existing businesses in favor of an "idea" and change of use which may or may not take place in the future. It is of critical importance that heavy industrial and manufacturing uses, which are prevalent and thriving with their IG "general industrial" zoning, in what the Specific Plan terms the new "Downtown Industrial Zone", continue to be supported and allowed in the future without the impediment of Planning Department hurdles via AUP or SUP. Injecting new Planning Department hurdles will hurt a thriving industrial area and many small business owners and employees.

With respect to parking, we strongly believe that parking minimums are a poor policy choice due to their negative effects on environmental sustainability and affordability. Requiring large numbers of parking spaces decreases space for other uses (including housing and space for bikes), substantially increases construction costs, and makes rent more expensive for tenants of new developments. While some car parking may be a good choice for a particular development, requiring large numbers of car parking in a Specific Plan that could be in place for decades as individual car use is declining and walking, biking, and other forms of mobility are becoming more popular seems short-sided at best and very harmful at worst. The State of California clearly recognizes the high costs and negative effects imposed by requiring large amounts of parking. Multiple bills have been passed in the California legislature recently that reduce parking minimums on a state level because local jurisdictions continue to require large numbers of parking spaces, which inhibits new development, particularly new housing development, and contributes to the state's very high unaffordability. We believe it is misguided for the City of Watsonville to require more parking per unit as a **minimum** in housing developments than the State allows as a **maximum per unit** for housing developments that meet bonus density requirements. We, along with an increasing number of planners, scholars, and politicians, believe that there should not be any parking minimums for new developments, but at the very least the amount of required parking in the Specific Plan should be reduced. As such, we hereby request that the minimum parking requirements be substantially decreased and/or eliminated.

With respect to maximum building heights/the number of stories a building may have, we believe that they are too low and should be increased, particularly in the Downtown Core. While project economics and building costs may currently dictate that no or few buildings taller than six stories would be built today in Watsonville, that may not be the case in the future. Our region is blessed with some of the most abundant natural beauty and nicest weather in the world. Allowing taller buildings would allow more housing in a concentrated area and that could help protect against sprawl (and loss of farmland) and reduce new ground-up development of raw land. Allowing taller buildings would allow more affordability. Allowing taller buildings would

allow more doctors, nurses, teachers, construction workers, cooks, plumbers, electricians, and farm workers. Allowing taller buildings would allow more students. Allowing taller buildings would allow more sustainability. Allowing taller buildings would allow shorter commutes. Santa Cruz is currently studying allowing buildings that could be as tall as 225 feet. The Downtown Core is a relatively small area and Watsonville should not constrain itself to a six-story limit on buildings for decades to come in its Downtown Core. Please allow for taller buildings in the Specific Plan.

The Specific Plan states, “The intent of the Downtown Specific Plan is to enable a lively and dynamic mix of diverse land uses within a safe, comfortable, human-scale, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use downtown environment. The intrinsic value and amenity of fine downtowns derives in large measure from their concentration of relatively high intensities of diverse uses within a relatively small area.” We believe that the “Standards” section of the Specific Plan is far too narrow and does not allow the flexibility needed to achieve a diverse and dynamic downtown either in architectural style or uses. Some specific items that we believe need to be changed include, but are not limited to: 100% front street buildout should not be required for the Downtown Core or 70% for Downtown Industrial (standards should be lower and allow more flexibility); in the Downtown Industrial Zone more than 70 feet of surface parking frontage should be allowed; building heights should not be limited to 6 stories in the Downtown Core; Massing Increments should not be required and/or they should be loosened greatly; the Façade Design requirements are way too restrictive and should be loosened [all new buildings should NOT be required to reflect the historic patterns and sensibilities of the past (having a formulaic approach will make buildings more homogenous and less interesting)], the Façade Materials requirements need to be significantly loosened [e.g., rather than mandating that heavier materials “must be used below the lighter material (e.g. brick below siding, not vice versa), the City should have fewer requirements and allow for creative and attractive designs]; modifications are needed to allow Retail/Housing Flex, Ground Floor Office, Ground Floor Residential, and Vehicular Access in the Main Street Overlay; and the Shopfronts section should be modified to allow businesses more flexibility (even if that means allowing an interior layout that does not provide full visibility into the interior of the space). Again, the Specific Plan will dictate development within the Specific Plan area for decades to come and being too narrow and specific on the Standards today will result in the Specific Plan inevitably restricting what can be built, unnecessarily and unreasonably, 15-20+ years from now when community needs, styles, and the market changes in ways that we cannot predict today. The one thing that is inevitable is change; we need to accept that change will occur and make sure the Specific Plan language is flexible enough to allow smart development to happen in the future based on the needs of that time, as opposed to inflexible “Standards” of 2022.

We appreciate all of the time and effort that has been put into the Downtown Watsonville Specific Plan so far. Without the important changes outlined in this letter, however, we fear that the Specific Plan could do more harm than good. Having the personal experience of participating in a multi-year Specific Plan process within the City of Watsonville for the Manabe Ow Business Park, we have seen firsthand how limiting and restrictive the Standards and restricted use sections of a Specific Plan can be; being overly limiting on a seemingly small detail within the Standards section today can lead to unnecessary 12+ month-long delays, millions of dollars in extra costs, and/or stopping an otherwise great development completely in the future. Further, we have experienced firsthand how we can plan for what we hope or expect to be developed within a Specific Plan area, but the needs of the community and the marketplace will dictate what actually gets built and that is often very different from the original vision. As such, it is imperative that the Specific Plan is flexible in order to accommodate future needs that we do not or cannot predict today. For these reasons, we respectfully request that the important changes requested in this letter are made to the Specific Plan to support the existing businesses and residents within the Specific Plan area now and also provide an adaptable platform for future growth and development. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

George Ow, Jr., Benjamin Ow, William Ow, Andrew Ow, and 30+ other family members associated with Ow Family Properties

VIA EMAIL

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