

— GONZALES —

Visitors clearly welcome here

\$3.4 million spent to redo downtown

By Glenn Cravens

The Californian

Gonzales city officials have often said they want to redo the city's downtown area to make it look nicer, attract businesses and get tourists to spend money in mom-and-pop stores.

It's long been an obvious goal, considering the fact the city's nearly 8,000 residents typically head to Salinas — just 15 miles away — or even San Luis Obispo to shop instead of saving gas and spending money in town.

But despite the talk, little changed in downtown Gonzales for years. Stores on Alta Minor Street stayed ho-hum, many with fading paint, and the few thin trees swaying in the Salinas Valley wind.

Once city officials and businesses agreed on change, it came.

A project that unfolded between 2001 and now has brought about quite a transformation.

The business district now has light-orange sidewalks, designs on the roadways, concrete sidewalk benches, nighttime lighting, more trees and an illuminated archway that welcomes visitors to town.

Work is not done, but the progress is clear.

Beautification also has carried a \$3.4 million price tag, as well as such inconveniences as roads closed for construction, temporary plank sidewalks, orange safety cones and scarce parking close to stores. The money is coming from the city's Redevelopment Agency, which is seeking funds from the state and city businesses.

Gonzales has come a long way to reach this point.

See **GONZALES**, Page 17



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Gonzales is building up a section of Alta Street, adding an illuminated archway to welcome visitors.

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— Carlos Lopez, public works director

GONZALES/

From Page 16

For the past 30 years, Public Works Director Carlos Lopez, along with council members who've come and gone, have tried to get businesses to agree on a plan to beautify the area. None was accepted — businesses didn't approve the look, or they just didn't want to accept change — until 2001, when property owners liked the concept created by SSA Architects of Santa Cruz, the same firm that designed California State University, Monterey Bay.

"We wanted to create a downtown construction program that everyone will be happy with in the end," Lopez said.

Gonzales Mayor Matt Gourley said he finds residents taking the work in stride.

"They know it's for the betterment of the city," Gourley said.

Despite his upbeat assessment, though, not everyone is thrilled.

"Construction is taking too long," said Linda Fellows, manager at Russ' TV Service on Fourth Street. "We've used up all our reserve (money), and I don't know whether we're going to make it before it's all done."

Fellows' block, the 0 to 99 block of Fourth Street, is the next portion of downtown being remodeled. Access to the road is blocked, there's no parking, and the street and sidewalk are filled with dirt and gravel.

Fellows said she might not have enough money to continue running the business past Oct. 31, Granite Construction's target date for completing that block.



RICHARD GREEN/THE CALIFORNIAN

A new archway built along Alta Street in Gonzales is almost completed Aug. 29.

"I work seven days a week, and last month I made just \$400," said Fellows, adding she usually makes triple the amount. "That is not going to pay the bills."

By December, the 100 block of Fourth Street will be redone with new roadways, lights, colored sidewalks and parking spots. City officials say they might look to remodel more roads and sidewalks after that but will meet later in the year to discuss it.

The construction has rubbed off on several businesses. Property owners have asked the city about renovating the outside of their businesses. Lopez said changes might include new facades, painting or additions of awnings and new windows.

"I hope the city gains a viable downtown," Gourley said. "Even now, just seeing everyone there on Sundays and having coffee in the downtown — that small-town atmosphere is back again. (U.S. Rep.) Sam Farr said the same thing when he was down here for his town hall meeting a couple weeks ago."