

Landmark mall hotel will fall

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SANTA CRUZ — The St. George Hotel will be demolished.

"We're taking it down," said Larry Erwin, city public works director. He said demolition of the nearly 100-year-old downtown hotel will begin later this week. The three-story hotel covers half a city block in the heart of the Pacific Garden Mall. Buildings across Pacific Avenue have already been torn down.

Erwin and City Manager Dick Wilson declared the single-room-occupancy hotel a health and safety risk under their emergency powers, which expire today. The powers extend from the disaster declaration after the earthquake. The decision is a reversal from November when city officials declared the hotel damaged but salvageable. At that time, owner Barry Swenson, a San Jose builder, said he wanted to tear the building down because he believed it could never be made earthquake safe.

The building housed 120 mostly low-income people before the earthquake. A dozen businesses including the Bubble Cafe, Gatsby's restaurant and The Sportsman's Shop were

located on the street level. Erwin said efforts were being made to help tenants claim any belongings that may be left inside.

The hotel's condition became progressively worse, Erwin said Monday. He said interior brick walls have separated further as a result of aftershocks.

A critical factor in declaring the hotel a safety risk is the rock foundation on which it sits. The hotel was built on the old bed of the San Lorenzo River. Its foundation is made from river bedrock rubble.

According to Swenson's engineers it would be impossible to support or otherwise strengthen the foundation to make the building safe.

"Seismically retrofitting the building is not a worthwhile option," according to a Dec. 21 letter to Swenson from Mark Cardosa, of Biggs Cardosa Associates, Inc. "It is not worth the risk of injury and lives, nor is it a cost effective approach to providing a safe structure," he wrote.

Engineers from Cardosa's firm inspected the hotel three times in November and December. Each report detailed more damage than in earlier reports.

The city's decision that the building presents an imminent danger to the public means that public funds will be used to demolish it. It also means there will be no review by the state Office of Historical Preservation.

Shortly after the earthquake, the state Legislature passed a bill requiring state review before the demolition of any building judged to have historical significance unless it was ruled a public safety hazard.

The city was under pressure from Swenson and his attorneys to declare the hotel a hazard. A Nov. 16 letter to Wilson from attorney William van Roo says Swenson will hold the city responsible for any injuries to people from the building. Van Roo charges that city officials refused to issue a demolition permit.

"It is almost as if the city is requiring the maintenance of a nuisance," he wrote.

Erwin said the demolition will qualify for funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA will pay 75 percent of the cost. The state Office of Emergency Services will pay about 75 percent of the remainder. The city is liable for between 7 and 10 percent, Erwin said. He hopes that state funds from the quarter-cent sales tax increase can be used to cover the local share.

St. George loses battle



Dan Coyne/Sentinel

The St. George hotel, covering half a city block, is unsafe because of earthquake damage, Santa Cruz officials say.