

Buildings can be saved, report says

Fixes proposed for Santa Cruz landmarks

By Paul Rogers
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In a key development that could influence whether two historic downtown Santa Cruz buildings will face the wrecker's ball, an independent engineer has concluded that the earthquake-damaged Trust and Elks buildings can be repaired.

City officials and preservation advocates said Wednesday that groups hoping to persuade the city council to save the buildings will almost certainly cite the newly released report, which details damage to the buildings and suggests ways to make them seismically stronger.

The red brick structures, which have stood next to each other at

Pacific and Soquel avenues since 1910, have been abandoned and fenced off since the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

Although both are eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, their owners have applied to demolish them, claiming that they are unsafe, critically damaged and prohibitively expensive to repair.

Four months ago, the owners, the Kett family of Watsonville, submitted plans to build copies of the existing structures. The city council will most likely decide sometime this summer whether to approve the structures' demolition and replacement.

The Ketts produced several engineering reports concluding that

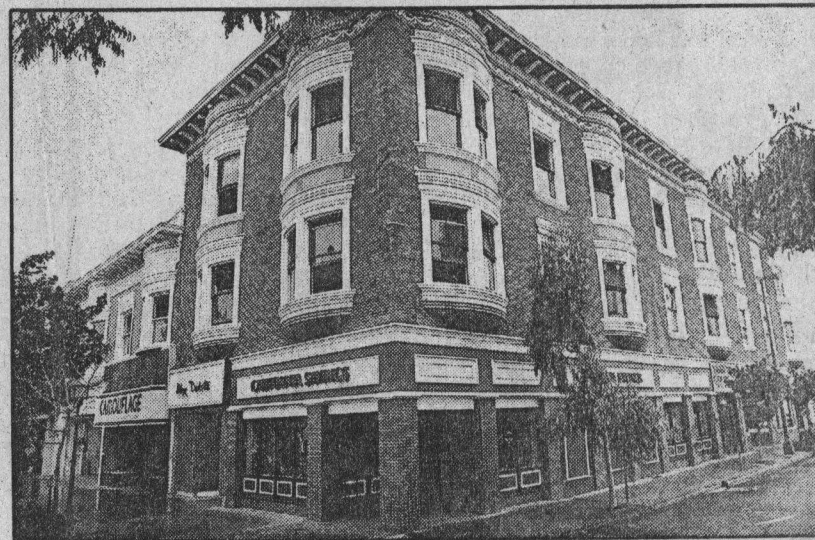
the buildings are unsalvageable. Preservation groups, who fought in vain to save the St. George Hotel last summer, have produced their own engineering reports stating that the Trust and Elks buildings can be saved.

"Architecturally, the Elks has more well-defined features and is older than the St. George," said Sarah Ray, chairwoman of the city's historic preservation commission.

City Manager Dick Wilson, faced with five reports offering conflicting structural data, in January hired Loring Wyllie of Degenkolb Associates in San Francisco for an unbiased assessment.

Wyllie reviewed the earlier re-

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Mercury News File Photograph

It'd be simple to fix buildings, study says

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ports and toured the buildings twice. This week he mailed Wilson a seven-page report concluding that both can be repaired and made safe.

"In general, it is our opinion that the Trust Building and Elks Building performed well in the recent earthquake," Wyllie said.

He said, "Repair of the damage to these buildings would be reasonably simple," and described the most serious damage: The north wall on the Elks building moved several inches west. The roof joists were pulled from their supports. Plaster on several interior walls cracked. And exterior bricks cracked or were severely loosened.

To salvage the building, he recommended that the outside brickwork be repaired with steel rods and epoxy and that primary walls be bolted to floors and the roof. Interior partitions should be rebuilt from plywood, he wrote, and rigid steel bracing should be erected to shore up the Elks' facade.

Meredith Marquez, an associate city planner, said the report "strengthens the preservationists' hand." But she added, "The next step is to find out how much it all will cost."

Marquez said the owners' agent, Ruben Fuentes, must now decide whether restoring the buildings is cheaper than rebuilding them, taking into account whether tenants would feel safe renting space in a restored building rather than a new one.

Fuentes, who could not be reached Wednesday, has said in previous interviews that, even if the buildings can be saved, insurance costs would be prohibitive. He has also said that bank financing would be a problem.

But preservationists say the decision shouldn't be motivated by money alone.

"At this point, everything that is still standing should be saved," said Ray, who also serves on the board of the Santa Cruz Historic Trust. "Economics is not the only issue."