

THE QUAKE

A YEAR LATER

Watsonville reacts to a major disaster

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

A few minutes after 5 p.m. on Oct. 17, Watsonville's Assistant City Manager Chuck Comstock was on Riverside Drive heading toward Highway 1 when something went dreadfully wrong with his car.

"For a few seconds it felt like all the lug nuts were gone on all my tires," Comstock said.

He managed to pull over to the side of the road. He got out of his car and walked around it. Nothing was wrong.

"Then I looked behind me and saw that the other cars were having the same problem."

Comstock tuned his car radio to KOMY and found out that a huge earthquake had just struck the area.

He got back out of the car and went to see why all of the traffic in front of him had come to a standstill. The highway, the portion over Struve Slough, had collapsed.

"I was about 10 seconds from that," he said.

It's also a story of well-laid plans and confusion, good intentions and misunderstandings, heroic acts and bungling.

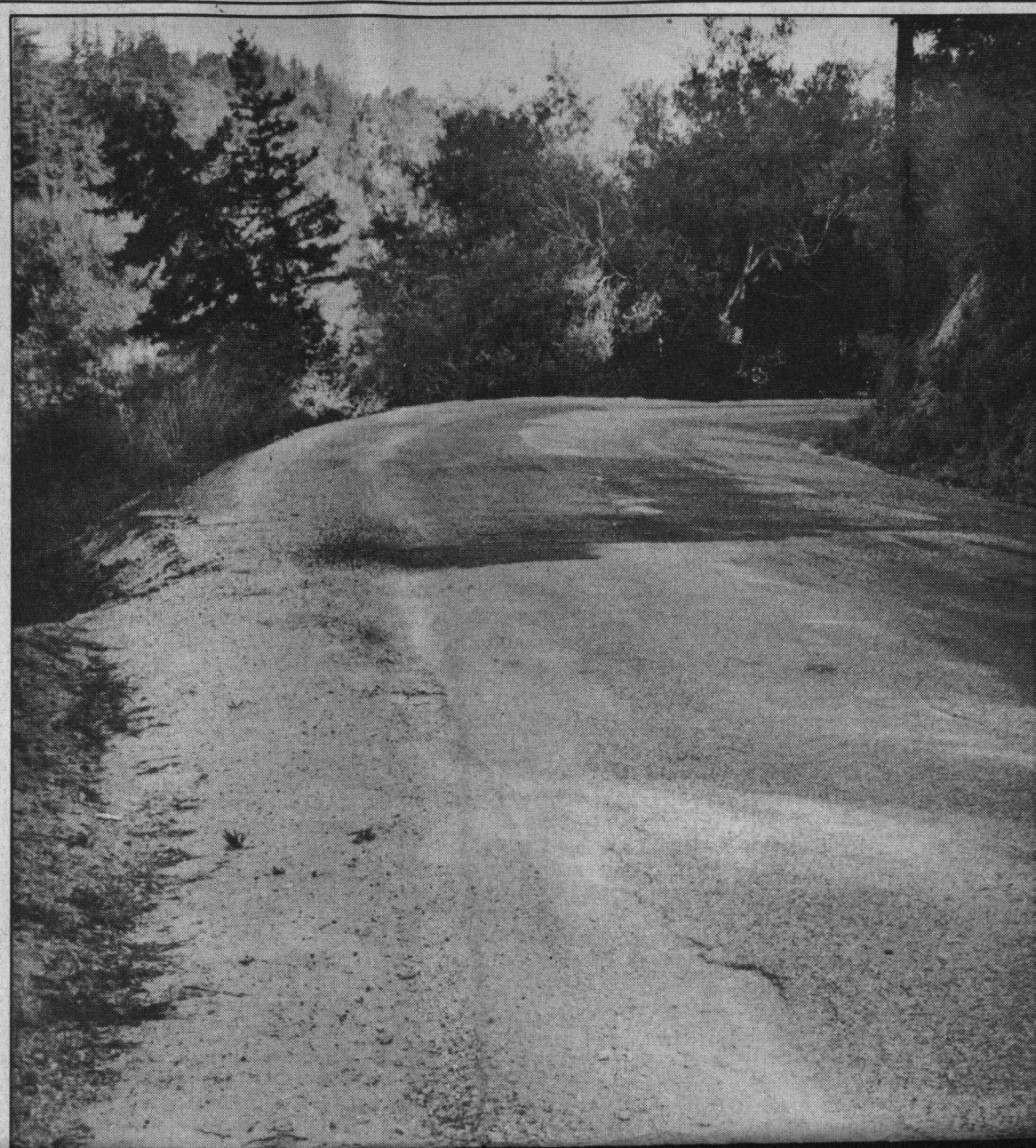
And as with any story, it varies a little depending on who tells it. As former City Councilman Dennis Osmer put it, "everything that was good about Watsonville got better during the days following the earthquake, and everything that was bad got worse."

A city goes to work

City staff who were at work when the earthquake hit immediately began putting the city's emergency plan into action. All city employees, from the city manager down to the part-time maintenance and clerical workers showed up at City Hall that night and went to work, many of them not going home at all for a number of days.

"Everyone came in, knew what to do, and from that point on, everybody just did their jobs," Radin said.

One of the first tasks was setting up the emergency operations center.



Fire Chief Gary Smith had always wondered if he would know when "the big one" hit.

He found out Oct. 17.

At 5:04 p.m., Smith and about 25 others, members of the Emergency Housing Coalition, were in a meeting at Fire Station 1 when the earthquake hit. As the shaking intensified, people ran for thresholds and dived under desks. One man, who was in a wheelchair, unable to move from his place at the table, tried to protect himself by holding a binder over his head.

When the shaking stopped, Smith, the coalition members and fire personnel got out of the station. They could see dust and columns of smoke rising in the air.

"There was no doubt about this one," Smith said in a recent interview.

The station's communications system was down. Firefighters cleared telephone lines that were down in front of the station and headed out toward the closest fire they could see, a home burning on Brennan Street.

City Manager John Radin was in his office above the Police Department when the earthquake hit. He remembers watching plate glass windows bowing and shaking, and that he and other city staffers were barely able to make it outside because of the rocking motion.

"When it stopped, I looked toward Main Street," Radin said. By then, the police and fire chiefs had arrived. "I told them to start setting up."

Radin took a quick tour of the city in a police car, radioing in the fires on Brennan Street and at the mobile home parks. He stopped by his own home on Terra Bonita Terrace to see if his wife, Clara, was OK.

"I said, 'Look, you'll have to manage by yourself for awhile,'" he said. "It was four days before I came back."

The story of how the city of Watsonville responded to the earthquake is first a story of hard-working city employees, many of whom worked long hours on disaster relief while their own earthquake-damaged homes went unattended.

ment, couldn't be used because the batteries in the city's backup generator were dead. The command center was set up temporarily in the parking lot, with a police unit and the Fire Chief's car set up next to each other taking calls.

According to Radin, the generator wouldn't start because the earthquake's shaking had shorted out its batteries.

But Osmer, who showed up at City Hall after making sure his family was OK, and was the one who figured out why the generator wouldn't start, has a different story.

The batteries were completely dead, and had probably been that way for a while, he said. The city had stopped testing its backup generator, located just outside the Police Department, because its exhaust pipe blew directly into the department's heating system and filled the building with smoke every time it was started up.

"So they just stopped testing it," he said.

Osmer finally rigged up a bunch of car batteries and got the generator going. The emergency center was opened two hours after the earthquake and the city emergency team turned on a television set to get news of the earthquake. What they saw were reports on the San Francisco Bay Bridge and fires in the city. Although reports over the next day or two began showing scenes from Santa Cruz, there was virtually no information about Watsonville.

The team felt that "the big one" had hit the San Francisco Bay Area and that Watsonville was on its own. Although Radin denies this account, according to a report written by Smith, because of the news coverage, the team "did not aggressively request emergency support, thinking that everyone was already stretched thin."

The city team got down to business. Each branch of the city government handled a different aspect of the disaster work. Comstock and the assistant fire chief were put in charge of getting supplies for city staff and the shelters; the recreation department worked on opening shelters and getting food and blankets to those who were homeless the first night; police dealt with traffic, evacuation and crime control; public works handled all public works emergencies, demolition and repairs; and the city clerk was put in charge of

See REACT page 14 ►



Today, the deep crack on Hazel Dell Road outside Watsonville has been patched, as have most of the roads the earthquake damaged. Below, a hopeful sign looks toward the coming decade in Watsonville.

Diane Varni



Kurt Ellison