

Earthquake 1989 Watsonville Rebuilding RP 6/14/90

Officials say it's almost certain Watsonville Hospital will build

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Watsonville Community Hospital, faced with about \$40 million in earthquake-damage repair costs, is expecting to build another building rather than make those extensive repairs.

Although the hospital is safe to use, it suffered major damage to its plumbing, heating and air-conditioning systems, along with sunken floors, broken windows and twisted metal framing. The repair bill is high because keeping the hospital open during repairs would require phased construction that would take five to seven years to complete.

Paul Estess, the hospital's chief operating officer, said this morning that he had gotten an indication this week from FEMA and the state Office of Emergency Services that a new building would be more feasible. FEMA and OES will pay for either the repairs or the new construction.

"That is the option the hospital has elected," he said.

Estess said that a site has not been chosen for a new hospital, but that FEMA was urging the hospital to use one of the two sites it already owns: 17 acres adjacent to the current building or 12½ acres behind Seacliff Inn in Aptos. Estess said the hospital

Why hospital was hit so hard

Watsonville Community Hospital's first floor was not structurally attached to the rest of the building, a hospital official said today, so when the Oct. 17 earthquake hit, the floor sank, taking the plumbing with it.

At a press conference this morning, Watsonville Community Hospital's Chief Executive Officer Paul Estess drew a picture of the hospital's structural system with colored felt pens and explained what happened to it during the Oct. 17 earthquake. Repairs are estimated at \$40 million.

The 21-year-old hospital,

which is built of poured concrete and steel, is supported by a system of pilings that go 55 feet under the ground, he said.

Although the sloughy ground around the hospital probably shook "harder here than it did elsewhere ... the building essentially stayed put, as it was supposed to do," Estess said.

The problem was the concrete slab ground floor, which was not structurally attached to the building, he said, sank as the earth beneath it settled.

"That's only a problem be-

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is hoping to be able to construct a new building within five years.

Although FEMA is not expected to make an official decision until the week of June 25, the hospital is assuming that a new building will be recommended.

Estess said the hospital will not tear down the current building, but will probably convert it to other uses such as a skilled nursing care building or chemical dependency program, which would not require the extensive plumbing system that a full-

service hospital, with surgery, laboratory and the like, needs. He said the hospital would probably retain ownership of the old building.

Designing a new building gives the hospital "a tremendous opportunity to repackage our facility," Estess said. A new building could be updated to reflect changing trends in health care, such as fewer inpatient surgeries, he said, and thus become more cost-efficient.

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The hospital will lose about \$1.5 million this year, the first time it has taken a loss, Estess said. Part of that, he said, is because of the increase in the number of Medi-Cal and other publicly assisted patients, which has risen about 10 percent over the last couple of years to 32 percent of patients served.

Estess said construction of a new building would be about \$40 million. FEMA will pay for 75 percent of that, and OES should pick up the remaining 25 percent, "unless the state runs out of money."

"Obviously that's an answer we need firmed up," he said.

The hospital has plans before the county planning commission for a senior housing project on its Aptos site, Estess said, but the Midcounty site is appealing for two reasons, he said. It's closer to the freeway, and it would be more accessible to people in the

Midcounty.

Building on the Watsonville site, which now has strawberry fields on it, might run into some opposition because it is consid-

ered prime agriculture land, Estess said, but "my sense is that there's belief that there's a compelling reason to change the zoning there."

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cause it took with it our plumbing system," Estess said.

When asked why the floor wasn't structurally attached, Estess said he wasn't completely sure. He said that he believed that at one time a basement was planned for the building and later removed from plans due to financial considerations, leaving the first floor basically sitting on the soil, "probably over the better judgment of whoever was the structural engineer at the time."

The floor in the hospital's north wing is structurally attached, he said, and it came

through the earthquake fine.

Initially, the hospital thought it could solve the problem by pouring concrete under the ground floor and then patching the broken pipes. But the concrete would have put too much pressure on the beams under the floor, and the hospital was left with the steep expense of having to remove and replace the entire first floor.

Because the hospital's sewer system was located under the first floor, there was no way of working on it without pulling up the floor. The system was re-routed after it was repaired so that any future damages to the system won't be so costly to repair.