

Work on Veterans Memorial Building in Santa Cruz set to begin

By TODD GUILD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz County Supervisors Tuesday approved a contractor to complete earthquake safety upgrades to the Veterans Memorial Building in Santa Cruz.

The winning bid, which came in at just under \$2.4 million, was awarded to San Carlos-based Gonsalves & Stronck Construction Company, Inc.

The building at 846 Front Street in Santa Cruz was closed in January 2010 after county officials inspecting reports of falling stucco said that damage from the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake rendered it uninhabitable.

The closure prompted local veterans groups to suspend the 24-year tradition of holding annual holiday meals in the building, which brought more than 1,000 people on Christmas and Thanksgiving.

In a letter to the supervisors, Architect Bill Fisher at the time stated that another strong earthquake could pose a "risk of injury or death to the occupants of the auditorium."

Dozens of groups who used the building expressed concern about the closure, saying that the building was one of a few places that offered a venue with 100-200 people and was perfect for community events such as speaking engagements.

But a more important issue, officials said, was having a place for veterans, particularly in the wake of several wars.

"I think it's very important



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

A bid has recently been approved by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors to complete leaded paint and asbestos removal, retro-fitting and repairs of the Veterans Memorial Building in downtown Santa Cruz.

that this building be opened," Supervisor Neal Coonerty said. "It's their home."

Weather permitting, construction is expected to begin immediately and is expected to last six months, Coonerty said.

"I think it's full-bore ahead at this point," he said.

The United Veterans Council sued the county over the building's closure in April 2010, and in November of that year a jury found the

county negligent in providing an adequate facility for the veterans. The hall was moved temporarily to a facility on Emeline Avenue which the United Veterans Council said lacked adequate facilities.

In June 2011 the county agreed to spend as much as \$3.4 million to renovate the building, and began the search for contractors.

In August 2010, the supervisors approved a plan to apply



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The Veterans Memorial Building is a Historical Landmark.

for a grant that will bring \$1.28 million in federal dollars, and to add \$320,000 in a matching contribution, which will go to renovate the building.

The grant, which would come from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, required a 20 percent match from the county, most of which will come from the county's general fund.

The 19,000 square-foot Veterans Memorial Building was completed in 1932, and bears the blue plaque from the county designating it a historical landmark. Before its closure, it housed services for veterans, as well as a place for classes, special events and a meeting place for organizations such as the Resource Center for Nonviolence. Organizers say the building was one of a few places that offered a venue with room for 100-200 people.

Approximately 40 people lost their jobs with the closure, according to the Santa Cruz County Administrative Office.