

# Work saved lives

By GREG BEEBE

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Shock, sadness and more than a little anger greeted the decision by city building inspector Dave Steeves to order the Loudon Nelson Center closed because of its potential to collapse in a major earthquake.

It was two weeks before Christmas 1986, and the community center "was a beehive of activity. The converted school — constructed in 1930 — was a hub of cultural, educational and recreational pursuits. Its sudden closure started a mad scramble for alternative sites for community events, classes and child-care and senior-citizens programs.

And, its closure for repairs to make it more safe in an earthquake "most definitely" averted certain disaster during the Oct. 17 earthquake, said Steeves.

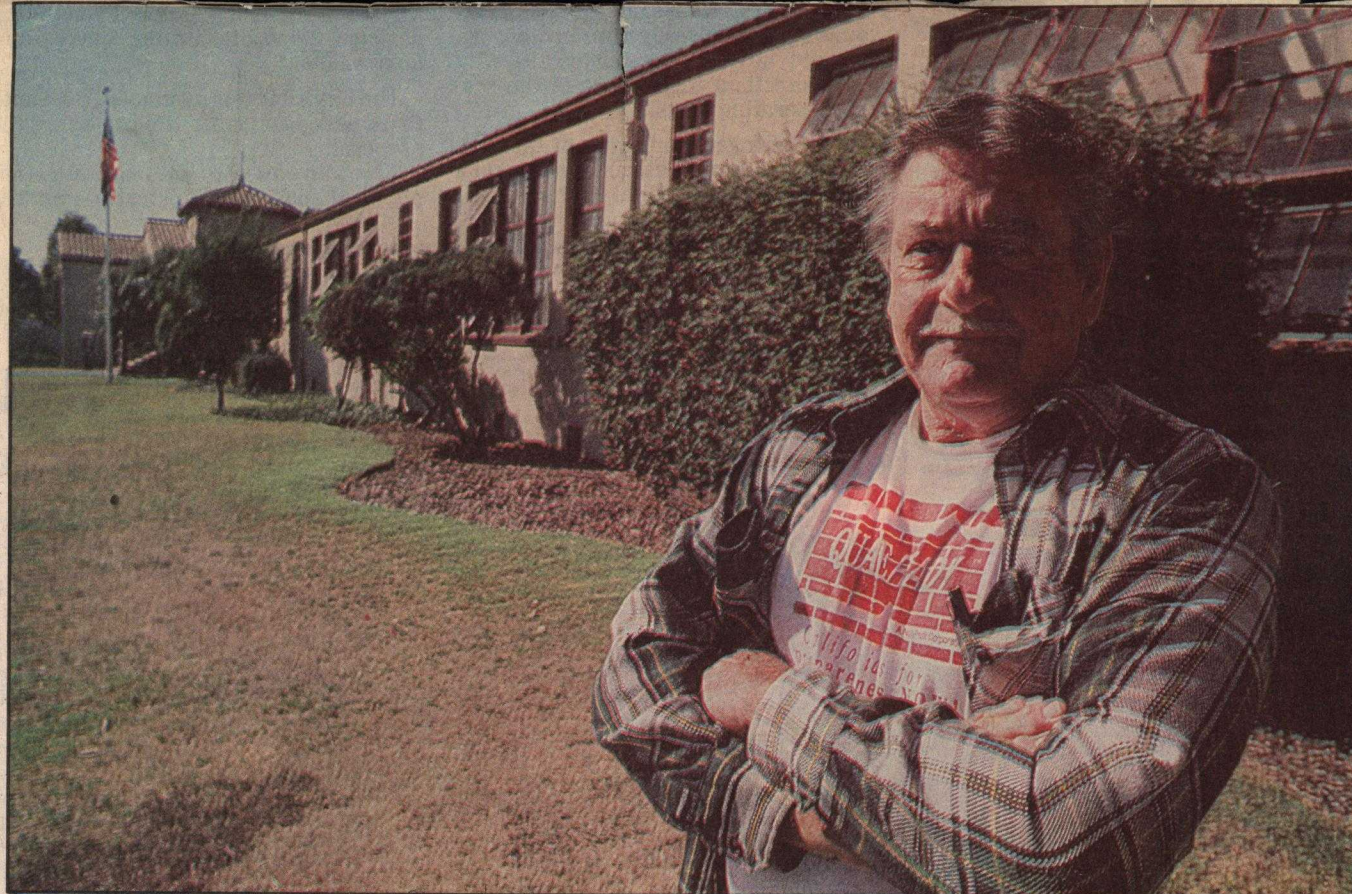
"Had the Nelson Center not been retrofitted there's a very good chance that the building would have failed," said Dick Stubendorff, the city's chief building official.

The practice of retrofitting — a structural engineering method designed to improve the ability of pre-1935 buildings to withstand major earthquakes long enough for the occupants to get out safely — assumed new meaning in the minutes following the worst disaster in Santa Cruz County history.

Since the quake, the city has moved to reinforce its retrofitting laws, said Stubendorff. "The earthquake was the catalyst that the city needed to push this thing along," he said.

The quake hastened the passage of three city ordinances. The first gave the city manager the authority to order hazardous buildings demolished. The second mandated that any buildings constructed after the quake conform to the state's uniform code for building conservation.

Please see BUILDING — A4



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Former building inspector Dave Steeves says work on Loudon Nelson Center probably saved lives.



EARTHQUAKE

## Wednesday

■ When it comes to rebuilding downtown, just about everyone has an opinion on how to proceed.

■ Despite its current condition, downtown will re-emerge as the cornerstone of county existence, community leaders say.

■ Where are they now — a look at some of the people who made news during the Oct. 17 temblor.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Unreinforced masonry buildings toppled in the quake.



# Building safety

Continued from Page A1

A third measure, the city's earthquake hazard reduction ordinance was enacted in February of this year. It's not unlike an ordinance proposed in 1987 by Steeves which failed for lack of support from the city council and business interests.

"It is similar to Steeves' (proposed) ordinance, though not quite as stringent," said Stubendorff. The law classifies five types of unreinforced masonry buildings according to community importance and risk of collapse. Police and fire stations and hospitals are at the top of the list, and must be retrofitted within three years. The law gives owners of unreinforced masonry buildings five years to reduce the hazards, Stubendorff said. There are 37 unreinforced masonry buildings still standing in the city of Santa Cruz.

Eventually, those buildings will have to be retrofitted. Common retrofitting methods include bolting a building's frame to its foundation, interconnecting brick walls to floors and roofs, bracing exterior parapets, adding interior partitions and shoring up commercial storefronts.

Low-interest loans to help Santa

Cruz building owners pay for retrofitting may be forthcoming thanks to a bill written by state Sen. Henry Mello and signed into law two weeks ago by Deukmejian.

City officials cringed at the thought of how the Nelson Center might have fared in the Oct. 17 disaster had it not been retrofitted.

"We took an incredible amount of heat for closing the Loudon Nelson Center for seismic rehabilitation," said City Councilman John Laird. "I just thank my lucky stars we had the courage to do it then, because there were children and seniors in the building at the time of the quake."

Jim Lang, director of the city Parks and Recreation Department, was reluctant to close the center that day in 1986, but "very clearly, we didn't have any choice." Parents in the center's preschool program were especially upset, Lang said. "Their entire lives were being disrupted."

After the quake, Lang thought, "Thank God we had done that building."

Structural engineering studies of the old Nelson Center revealed, among other things, that its inside walls were neither connected to

the roof nor the foundation and that the center's roof framing was "overstressed."

The outspoken Steeves was cast as a bad guy by the many individuals and groups who used the Nelson Center. "I wasn't very popular," he said. "Look at the big flap we had there when I made them close it. And then after the quake was over, here was this building being used as an emergency shelter."

"After the earthquake I happened to be going by the Nelson Center with a reporter and the people in the building came out and hugged me and thanked me for making it safe," Steeves said. "Needless to say, they were very happy we had done the retrofit."

"Strange things ... Here was a building that we had identified was hazardous. It just shows you that retrofitting works."

As the chief building inspector for the city of Santa Cruz from 1979 to 1987, Steeves waged a zealous — and sometimes lonely — campaign to retrofit city buildings that he deemed a high risk for collapse in a big earthquake.

In a 1983 story about how Santa Cruz would fare in a major earthquake, Steeves mused, "The mall scares me, it really does."

His efforts to get the city council to consider the retrofitting ordinance he proposed in 1987 met with anger, indifference and opposition from cost-conscious downtown property owners.

Laird recalled "Dave floating an ordinance that he had not run by his own boss, the city manager or the city attorney. He laid no groundwork for it. It caused a fire storm in the downtown business community. They believed the ordinance would drive many of them out of business," Laird said.

"I think if Dave had used a little skill in presenting the idea it could have gone a little further. His bosses, the city attorney and the City Council were all reading it in the newspaper along with everybody else," Laird said.

"If you want to be effective, you line up members of your team before you march on the field," Laird said.

"The council did what I think was a good resolution, which is we worked with state Sen. Henry Mello to arrange for state legislation for low-interest loans for people to retrofit," Laird said. Two weeks before the earthquake, Gov. George Deukmejian vetoed the legislation.

"We wanted to figure out a way we could both have retrofitting and have nobody driven out of business" in the process, Laird said.

As part of a state retrofitting law enacted in 1986, California cities and counties were required to compile a list of unreinforced masonry buildings and issue a report by the end of 1989.

Santa Cruz's list included 46 potentially hazardous buildings, 26 of which were considered historic. Of those 26 historic buildings, nine were destroyed in the earthquake.

"In response to the state law, the city had done an inventory of the buildings in the downtown," Laird said. "It was scheduled for our council agenda on Oct. 24. The buildings listed (in the inventory) as the least structurally sound were the ones that came down, almost to a building."

Those downtown structures which had undergone seismic retrofitting — including the ID Building, Haber's Furniture and Poor Richard's Almanac — generally escaped the earthquake unscathed, Steeves said.

"Those buildings did not collapse and people were able to evacuate safely and it wasn't

overly costly to retrofit," said Steeves.

Even the Cooper House — which had undergone retrofitting but was later demolished due to quake damage — withstood the earthquake long enough for those inside to get out alive, Stubendorff said.

Laird said the earthquake proved "what we were scheduled to learn the week after the quake, anyway: That there's no place for unreinforced masonry in high seismic zones."

Santa Cruz City Manager Dick Wilson said, "The earthquake has to make one a believer in building codes, and even beyond codes and into tying things down."

It was "very hard" for Steeves to resist the temptation to say "I told you so" after the Oct. 17 earthquake severely damaged or destroyed 27 buildings in downtown Santa Cruz, killing three people.

Steeves is content that he gave it his best shot. "I tried, and it was the best I could do. (The city, merchants and downtown building owners) chose to look at it not as a public safety item, but as an economic item. My concern was public safety."