

EARTHQUAKE '89 - City of Santa Cruz

✓Engineers don't agree on safety of St. George

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SANTA CRUZ — The St. George Hotel is not in imminent danger of collapse, an engineer specializing in historic buildings said Wednesday.

Damage to the hotel is similar to damage to other unreinforced masonry buildings along Pacific Avenue, according to Michael Krakower, an engineer with the Pasadena firm of John Kariotis & Associates. "I don't see it as anything different or unusual," he said.

His opinion opposes engineers hired by the building's owner who said the condition of the hotel's foundation made it impossible to repair.

Krakower and several others toured the three-story downtown hotel last week after city officials postponed plans to demolish it.

Two weeks ago, City Manager Dick Wilson declared the 93-year-old building was an imminent danger to public safety and would have to be demolished. The declaration came after engineers for the building's owner, San Jose developer Barry Swenson, declared the structure unsafe.

Demolition was scheduled for last Thursday. The hotel received a stay of execution when the regional director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation said the organization would do everything in its power to block the use of federal funds to raze the building.

Meanwhile, the owner of an adjacent building that housed Zoccoli's delicatessen wants to get moving on rebuilding so the business can reopen. Tom Mills said he hopes to rebuild a wall between his building and the hotel. But Mills cannot move until the issue of the hotel is resolved.

The availability of federal funds are key to future of the building. The Federal Emergency Management Agency will not approve federal funds for demolition until a state agency reviews the building, said Steade Craigo, deputy state historic preservation officer.

FEMA has not approved the demolition, he said. Under federal law, the state Office of Historic Preservation must approve all demolitions of buildings listed on the National Historic Register of Historic Places, such as the St. George.

Craigo said the state office is concerned about the number of low-income people made homeless because of damage to the hotel, and is watching the issue closely.

The city's demolition decision "is clearly inappropriate. They're calling anything an imminent danger."

— Kathryn Burns, National Trust
for Historic Preservation

Under a new state law passed within weeks of the earthquake, all demolition requests must be reviewed unless a building is judged a public safety danger.

Craigo said the hotel doesn't come under the state law because of the city's declaration the building is a safety hazard, but it does fall under federal rules.

Kathryn Burns, western regional director of the National Trust, disagreed, saying both apply because the city's decision nearly three months after the earthquake "is clearly inappropriate. They're calling anything an imminent danger."

She said the National Trust has money available for loans to help shore up damaged buildings.

FEMA money is also available for bracing and stabilizing buildings for public safety, according to state officials who toured the area in late November.

In a report issued Nov. 22, a state and federal team stated they found moderate damage, 2 on a scale of 0 to 6, to the hotel's exterior walls and frame. All damage was repairable, they said. The only hazards listed were a parapet and ornamentation in the lobby.

No mention was made of the foundation, which Swenson's engineers said was made of rock rubble and was impossible to repair.

Krakower, who inspected the hotel last week, said he saw no evidence of a rock foundation but did not fully investigate in the basement. Krakower and the Kariotis firm are widely regarded as experts in the rehabilitation of historic structures.

"Normally the foundation is not what causes a building to come down," he said. After an earthquake "you usually don't dig down in the basement to see if the foundation is cracked. You usually look above ground."