

Flatiron not on list of historic buildings

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SANTA CRUZ — The Flatiron building — the oldest structure in downtown Santa Cruz — is not on the city's list of protected historic buildings.

That means the council's Historic Preservation Commission has no official role in scrutinizing the request to demolish the quake-damaged building.

"Isn't that peculiar?" asked Santa Cruz resident Ross Gibson, who is an architectural historian. "What's the Historic Preservation Commission there for, if not that?"

In 1986, when preservationists were updating the city's 10-year-old list of historic structures, the Flatiron was penciled in for consideration.

But the City Council at that time bowed to public sentiment and allowed property owners to decide if they wanted their structure on the list.

The Rittenhouse family, which owns the Flatiron, was adamantly opposed.

"We wanted to avoid the bureaucratic red tape that was attached with that designation," said Councilman Louis Rittenhouse.

(The designation requires owners of listed structures to get special permits before remodeling, and demolition permits can be denied on those worthy of "landmark" status.)

"(The elder) Rittenhouse . . . just said he'd fight it tooth and nail, and take us to court," said Doni Tunheim, who was on the Historic Preservation Commission in 1986. "We just basically chickened out."

The Rittenhouses weren't the only ones who didn't want their buildings on the list.

Of the 430 old homes and buildings the commission wanted to add five years ago, only about 250 listings were not protested by property owners.

The original list in 1976 included 330 structures. The Flatiron, said Tunheim, was passed by on that first go-around.

The triangle-shaped Flatiron building was built in 1860 by one of the city's most influential pioneer developers, F.A. Hihn.

After the earthquake struck in October 1989, the largely remodeled building remained standing, but was damaged.

Rittenhouse said his studies showed it would cost more than double to repair the building than to demolish it and start over.

"I think it's a shame; it's an outrage the oldest building downtown doesn't have any historic preservation," said Tunheim.

Although the Flatiron isn't on the Historic Building Survey, the fact it's in

the old Pacific Garden Mall requires city officials to make sure demolition is the best option.

Meredith Marquez, an associate planner for the city, said the same engineers who helped convince the Trust building owners that remodeling was the answer will be hired to study the Flatiron.

The engineers, H.J. Degenkolb and Associates of San Francisco, will offer an independent assessment of Rittenhouse's request to demolish and rebuild.

Sarah Ray, chairwoman of the Historic Preservation Commission, was among those on the board who did not know the Flatiron proposal would not be coming before them for review.

"I definitely feel that it's a prominent location, so what's planned for the replacement building is very important for us to study . . . and that will be lost in this process of not coming before the commission," said Ray.

"I was interested in seeing what the reports were, and then making a decision on whether it needs a fight or not."

Tunheim, who helped wage the lost battles over saving the Cooper House and St. George, said she wouldn't fight to save the Flatiron building.

"I got beat up so badly over the St.

George; I don't think the community cares about its old buildings," said Tunheim.

In 1973, Santa Cruz became the first city in the state to adopt an historic preservation plan. The commission was formed in 1974, and the first Historic Building Survey booklet was published two years later.

The movement was spurred by the demolition of the old McHugh-Bianchi building at the top of Pacific Avenue after a fight to preserve it.

According to historian Gibson, the spark to save buildings downtown may have gone out.

"People are so afraid to seem like they're obstructing the redevelopment of downtown," said Gibson.

Like everyone else, Rittenhouse said he was surprised the Flatiron wasn't on the city's historic list.

"But I felt pretty confident in the decision I made," said Rittenhouse. "So I would have been very surprised if the (Historic Preservation) Commission hadn't reached the same conclusion."

After the Planning Department receives the independent report on the Flatiron, the proposal will go to the Zoning Board. The final decision on what will happen rests with the City Council.