

✓ Felton club slow to rise from ashes

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FELTON — The Felton Community Club is expected to approve a design today to replace its 65-year-old community hall, which burned down two years ago this week.

At the time of the fire, club members hoped to replace the building that stood at the corner of Kirby Street and Highway 9 in less than a year.

But two years later, with every step of the rebuilding process dogged by difficulty and controversy, the group is at least \$85,000 short of what it needs for the project and has not even started fund raising.

Not the least of the difficulties has been disagreement over whose vision will prevail: that of the old-guard Felton residents who run the Community Club or that of the newer and younger community members still regarded as newcomers.

Although a series of public design workshops approved a two-story building in 1991, final drawings expected to be



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Firefighters couldn't save Felton Community Club in 1990.

approved at the group's meeting tonight show a one-story building with a two-story entrance foyer on the corner. If approved, the drawings will be released today.

Club members hope that once they settle on a design, the rest of the community will pull together to help raise high the roofbeams of what was once the town's heart and soul.

The loss of the hall has left more than just a vacant weed- and trash-filled lot on Highway 9.

Before it burned down two years ago, the Felton Community Hall was about as multi-purpose as a building can get.

The wooden hall was built in 1925, largely by volunteers, for \$5,160.80. In the years since, it has served at various times as a community center, a church and a school. The town library was even housed there briefly, in the waiting room outside the women's bathroom.

In its day, the old hall was the scene of countless wedding receptions and anni-

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versary parties. For many years, the annual graduation exercises of the former Felton Grammar School, which was next door, were held there.

The building was even cast as a courthouse in a Disney movie shot there in 1974, "Escape from Witch Mountain."

In recent years, a community sing-along gathered regularly at the hall, along with garden clubs, 4-H groups, Masonic lodges and other community groups.

Dancers through the years have clogged, hoed down and waltzed on the old wooden floor. (No rock 'n' roll, though. One disastrous experience in the '70s soured the club forever on rock 'n' roll. "They tore out the toilets and trashed the dining room," recalls Arlene Pike, long-time community club member. "That was the end of any rock 'n' roll music.")

Antique auctions and bazaars were held there, and generations of thespians trod the boards of the old stage.

All that came to an end two years ago when the building mysteriously caught fire and burned down in a half hour, despite being located next to the fire department. No cause has ever been established for the fire.

After the August 1990 fire, the club said it would rebuild the hall just as it was before. But the Felton Business Association stepped in and demanded that community residents have a say in the design as well.

Stormy public design workshops met through the winter, eventually coming up with a two-story design that would have increased the old hall's size from 4,600 square feet to 7,000, with an estimated cost of nearly \$500,000.

The vision of "younger" residents (some at the workshops claimed they were old enough to be flattered by the reference) has been of a larger community hall bustling with activity.

In their vision, exercise and dance groups rub elbows with martial arts students. There are storytelling festivals and folk-music concerts.

The hall hosts conferences and business seminars, they dream, drawn by the town's nearby red-wood parks, wineries and old-time railroad.

But Felton Community Club members think that's unrealistic. A bigger building with expanded activities would cost more, they say — more to build, and more to maintain.

"I guess I'm old school," said C. F. "Nick" Nichols, president of the

Community Club. "I just couldn't see where we should be catering to people over the hill. We should be catering to people who live here and keep the rents in reach."

Rents at the old hall ranged from \$15 for the garden club meetings to \$150 for a wedding reception.

"The interest of the Community Club was to build something that was practical," Nichols said. "Something we could maintain. Something we could offer to the community at a reasonable rent."

To that end, club members favor rebuilding a hall as much like the old one as possible.

But the settlement offered by the club's insurance company was less than the cost of rebuilding even the same size hall.

The club accepted \$216,000 from Transamerica Insurance Co., but is trying to get the company to pay another \$85,000 the group figures it's owed. It now has some \$235,000 banked toward the cost of the new building.

No estimates are available yet for the new building, but Nichols figures they'll be in the \$325,000 range — leaving the group with nearly \$100,000 more to raise.

Nichols hopes to be able to get grants for the rebuilding, and the club has applied for tax-exempt status from the state Board of Equalization.