

How storm of '82 started Joe Cucchiara on a mission

By KATHARINE BALL
STAFF WRITER

The mission that occupied Joe Cucchiara for most of his two terms as a Santa Cruz County supervisor was born in the storms of 1982 that lashed the county, wiping out roads, bridges, homes and people.

That winter, Cucchiara, one year into his first supervisorial term, found himself one day wading through three feet of water down Clear Creek Road, which had temporarily become Clear Creek itself. He was trying to get to the emergency meeting the supervisors had called to cope with the catastrophe.

Cucchiara's aide, Fred Keeley, picked up him and the chain-saw he was carrying, and the two buzz-sawed their way through fallen trees into town.

Shortly after this dramatic journey, Cucchiara discovered that federal disaster aid was not all it was cracked up to be, and that Santa Cruz County would receive only about 37 cents for every dollar's worth of damage inflicted — hardly enough to begin the necessary massive rebuilding of roads, water systems, bridges and homes.

Cucchiara became a man with a mission. His district, encompassing San Lorenzo Valley and Scotts Valley, had sustained half the total storm damage in the county.

Earlier this year, a new federal disaster-aid bill was signed into law, largely due to Cucchiara's efforts.

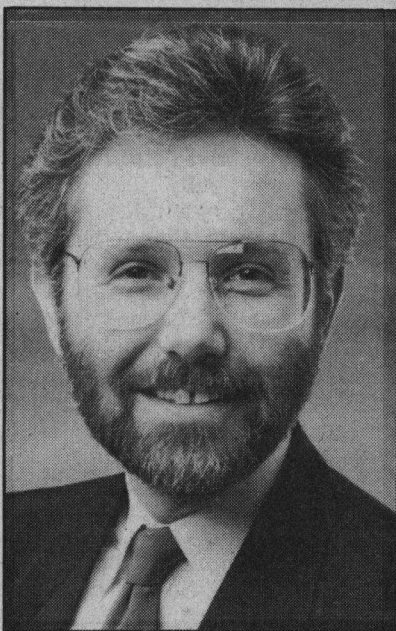
That bill establishes a minimum federal contribution of 75 cents for every dollar of damage in a federally declared disaster. It allows nearby military bases to go to the aid of disaster-torn communities. There are more than 30 specific provisions in the bill, most of them born out of Cucchiara's frustrations in trying to restore Santa Cruz County's 5th District. They will benefit everyone in the nation.

The 41-year-old Cucchiara received an unusual accolade this past November from the County Supervisors Association of California, which singled him out for recognition.

The plaque that CSAC presented him reads: "One person's courage is a majority."

On a recent afternoon, Cucchiara described the steps he took to bring about the aid reform.

"It became very clear in the first weeks (after the storm) that we were going to have a major problem getting our fair share of federal disaster assistance. There was a breakdown between the law and its implementation," Cucchiara said.



"I like to do things that people can touch and feel."

Joe Cucchiara

During the storms of '82 and '83, the county "had to fight tooth and nail and get special intervention by congressmen" just to be able to borrow heavy equipment and generators from Fort Ord. While the previous Federal Emergency Management Agency bill allowed for up to 100 percent reimbursement for damage repairs, it had no minimum amount the federal government had to contribute.

Cucchiara went neighborhood-by-neighborhood in his district, assessing the scope of the damage and the gap between what the FEMA bill promised and what the county was getting.

He took his information to CSAC and began discussing the FEMA discrepancy with other supervisors who had experienced it. He became the chairman of a CSAC task force for FEMA reform.

"In 1983, the concern took hold at the statewide level," Cucchiara said.

Slowly, by increments, Cucchiara advanced his cause. In 1986, Cucchiara got the National Association of Counties to take up the cause, and that group persuaded Congress to hold hearings on the matter. Those hearings led to revisions of the FEMA bill. This year, the new bill was approved in its final form. The upshot of the lengthy process was that Cucchiara managed to correct most of the pitfalls in the bill he had personally experienced.

Revision of the FEMA bill was probably Cucchiara's greatest accomplishment in his eight years as supervisor, he said, though he is also proud of finding the cash to build the Boulder Creek branch library and finagling

state funds to improve the intersections on Graham Hill Road at Highway 9 and Mount Hermon Road.

"I like to do things that people can touch and feel," said Cucchiara, an architect by training. "The real needs of people are often manifested in a physical plant. They want a road to drive to work on, they want a bus to take, they want a child-care center. Government should accomplish real tasks that are tangible to people's everyday lives."

Despite his success in constructing tangible resources for the people of the 5th District, Cucchiara decided not to run for a third term, though probably assured of re-election.

Instead, Cucchiara will act as a special consultant to CSAC for at least a few months, to work towards getting an initiative on the state ballot that would guarantee that the state will pay all costs of any programs it says counties must provide, such as welfare.

Currently, the state holds counties legally accountable for providing welfare services, but does not pay them the full cost of providing them.

The proposed initiative would also require the state to provide counties with spending money the counties can put into services of their own choice — cash that would make up for the spending flexibility counties lost after Proposition 13 passed in 1978 and limited the amount by which property taxes could be raised.

Cucchiara said CSAC hopes to get the initiative on the June 1990 ballot. His task will be to assess support for the proposed measure among supervisors all over the state and determine what specific elements it should contain.

The new job will constitute Cucchiara's fourth career change, he said. He began as a lecturer in the School of Environmental Design at UC-Berkeley, while he worked toward his doctorate in architecture. He worked for an architectural firm in New York City, helping to design the interior of Skylab. And now he is winding up eight years as a supervisor.

He has no regrets, he said, to be moving on, particularly since Keeley, his onetime aide, will succeed him.

"The last eight years have been the most stimulating in my entire life. It's what I call cafeteria-style work. You don't know what your job is until you get to work that day ... I've given it everything I could muster. There's no better sense of accomplishment than knowing you've done your best."