

Santa Cruz gears up for a comeback

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Of all the facts and figures detailing the effects of the Loma Prieta earthquake on Santa Cruz County, none are more compelling than these:

Killed in the quake: Shawn McCormick, 21; Robin Ortiz, 22; Catherine Treiman, 75; Elida Ortega, 44; Gary Phillips West, 41, and Dale DeBenedetti, 27.

Or these: 3,000 homeless, nearly 1,500 injured and \$1 billion in damage.

More than a month after the Oct. 17 earthquake, much of the Bay Area has returned to normal. In Santa Cruz County, it is still a struggle.

Tourism has come to a virtual halt. The long-term effects on the county's agricultural industry may not surface until spring. And both the county and its cities expect to lose tax revenue because of the

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Hwy. 17 reopening to boost Santa Cruz tourism

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extensive damage to businesses and homes.

But Santa Cruz County will survive.

"The spirit of people to put things back together is absolutely remarkable," Santa Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt said. "To me, this has been — and I suppose it's a cliché, but it's so true — a testimony to the human spirit."

Signs of that spirit are everywhere:

✓ In Santa Cruz, huge tents went up last week in parking lots along Cedar Street behind what is left of the Pacific Garden Mall. The tents, slated to open the day after Thanksgiving, will house merchants who lost their stores in the earthquake. Today at the north end of the Mall, the Town Clock, which stopped when the earthquake struck, will be reset.

✓ In the mountains, near the quake's epicenter at the edge of the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, residents whose hard-hit homes are still salvageable, are

hammering, digging and trying to seal their places against the winter rains. County supervisors last Tuesday eased some repair permit restrictions to help those homeowners whose dwellings can be saved.

✓ In Watsonville, sample ballots for the Dec. 5 city council elections are being printed and distributed. The makeshift tent cities are closing one by one. Some families have been relocated to motel rooms, others to a migrant labor camp outside town. Workers are preparing the first of several temporary mobile home parks where these newly homeless will live during rebuilding. And Main Street merchants hope to conduct business out of trailers by early December.

But it will take years before the county fully recovers. An estimated \$1 billion in public and private property was destroyed. Much of downtown Watsonville and Santa Cruz was devastated, including 580 homes countywide and at least 137 businesses. Another 1,915 homes were severely damaged.

In Watsonville, there are now eight families for every available rental unit and more than a month after the earthquake, half of the 1,500 people in the city who were homeless on Oct. 17 are still living in shelters or backyard tents.

"To have half the people still living in shelters a month after the earthquake, that just doesn't happen in a California disaster," said Luther Perry of the county's emergency housing task force.

In Santa Cruz — where 90 private buildings were destroyed in the quake or demolished since — damage to public facilities totals \$45 million, said Wormhoudt. Among those facilities are bridges, streets, the sewer and water systems and the dam at Loch Lomond, the city's principal water supply.

Structural damage on Watsonville's Main Street is estimated at \$175 million and the number of displaced business grows almost daily. The Army Corps of Engineers is repairing the city's levee system — estimated at a \$22 million job — hoping to complete work before winter rains bring the new threat of floods.

In the fields of the Pajaro Valley, the long-term effects of the quake on agriculture probably won't be felt until April, when growers discover possible leaks in irrigation wells and breaks in aging underground irrigation lines. Crop losses and damage to warehouses and contents already have been estimated at between \$12 and \$15 million, but many growers are

not reporting their losses, said Steve Siri, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau.

"A lot of agriculture will rebound, but some guys are going to have a tough road coming back because they're going to incur more debt," Siri said. "Fifteen seconds can do a lot to a small farming community. It's going to be a long time before Watsonville comes back."

The fiscal impact of the quake is still not clear.

"We don't really know the long-term effects, but we do know that the county is going to experience revenue shortfalls from lost sales taxes, property taxes, transient occupancy (hotel room) taxes and deed-transfer taxes," says County Auditor-Controller Gary Knutson.

Robert Shepherd, in charge of the Santa Cruz's money matters, was more to the point about the city's finances:

"I think they look pretty bleak," said Shepherd, who estimates the city will lose 20 percent of the money it was counting on to fund its \$20 million general spending program.

The virtual halt of tourism — normally a \$250 million-a-year industry in the county — has been a major contributor to the financial problems.

As Rita Quinn, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council said, "First we had a natural disaster. Now we're having an economic one."

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But like everyone else, the tourist industry is ready to fight back. With Highway 17, the tourist — and commuter — lifeline to the county slated to reopen today, Quinn said an aggressive marketing campaign is slated. The message to potential tourists is, "Come back! We've missed you!" she said.

Ann Parker, spokeswoman for the county's number one private tourist attraction, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, said the effort requires that "we put out the image that we are not defeated, that we are not rubble, that we still have a lot of energy here and this

is still a beautiful place."

The return of tourism will be one sign of the county's recovery; another will be the return of shoppers to downtown Santa Cruz and Watsonville.

"We're going to come out of the chute chasing a bull," said John Lisher, manager of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce. If the tent pavilions are successful — and most observers expect them to be — "that will put us through the Christmas season, and that will put us through next year, and by that time we will be rebuilding."

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