

# A NEW VISION

Earthquake - 10 years later

10.17.14



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

Rescuers lift and dig through fallen rubble searching for survivors in Ford's department store.

## Vision Santa Cruz authored rebuilding of a devastated downtown

By J.M. Brown

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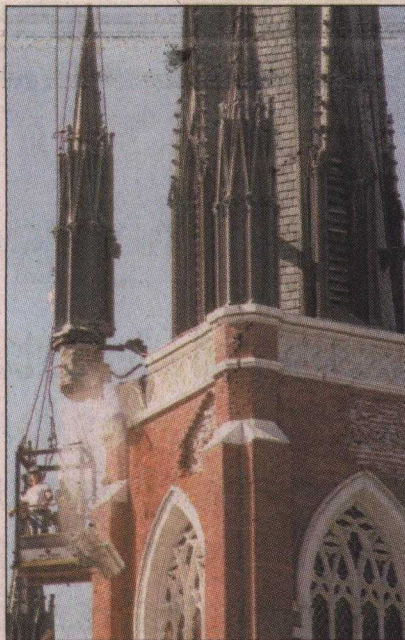
**SANTA CRUZ »** The notion that 36 people in Santa Cruz could agree on anything — let alone the monumental task of rebuilding an earthquake-ravaged downtown — might seem a fantasy except for the fact that it happened.

On Jan. 11, 1990, nearly three months after the 6.9-magnitude Loma Prieta temblor killed three people downtown and toppled much of Santa Cruz's historic commercial core, a 36-member group comprised of city leaders, property owners, merchants and other civic leaders began the unenviable task of drawing a road map for what would become the Downtown Recovery Plan.

That document formed the guidelines for what Pacific Avenue would rise into the future — rising from the ashes of the shaken and bulldozed Pacific Garden Mall to become a thriving destination for shopping, dining and entertainment.

Reaching unanimous agreement on what were called the "First Principles" within five months of that first meeting — and then to recommend the Downtown Recovery Plan 15 months later — required a great deal of debate and compromise between camps of people

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BILL LOVEJOY — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

A spire is removed from Watsonville's St. Patrick's Church as post quake demolition began on the Watsonville landmark after the quake. The church has been restored and shows no evidence of the damage that required temporary removal of its spires.

## WATSONVILLE QUAKE

**Homes:** 300 destroyed, 1,500 damaged.

**Downtown:** 16 buildings demolished, including the popular Ford's Department Store.

**Killed:** Elida Ledesma Ortega, 44.

**+** **Online:** To view a slide show of photos from the Loma Prieta earthquake, visit [SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM](http://SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM)

## Memory fades as Watsonville grows in years since Loma Prieta earthquake

By Donna Jones

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**WATSONVILLE »** People who lived through the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in Watsonville haven't forgotten the devastated downtown, the hundreds of shattered homes, the makeshift camps set up in city parks by those who lost homes or were too afraid to return to them.

But not everybody remembers. Perhaps as many as half or more of today's residents either weren't born or arrived from elsewhere in the 25 years since the 6.9-magnitude earthquake struck.

"It was a different time, and it's not fresh in the minds of everyone," said Councilman Lowell Hurst, reflecting on the 25th anniversary of the Oct. 17 quake. "It's a great opportunity to try to paint a picture and encourage preparedness."

Back in 1989, Hurst was running for a first term on the City council under the new court-mandated system of district elections. He had just left a campaign meeting at the home of a friend on Oregon Street when the shaking began.

"The telephone poles were swaying. You could actually see a wave in the ground, in the soil, kind of like a wave in the ocean, move through and ripple the ground," he said. "Chimneys were simultaneously falling down, gas lines were hissing, water lines separating. ... It was a terrifying experience for everybody in town. People came out of their houses holding their heads in disbelief."

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# Quake

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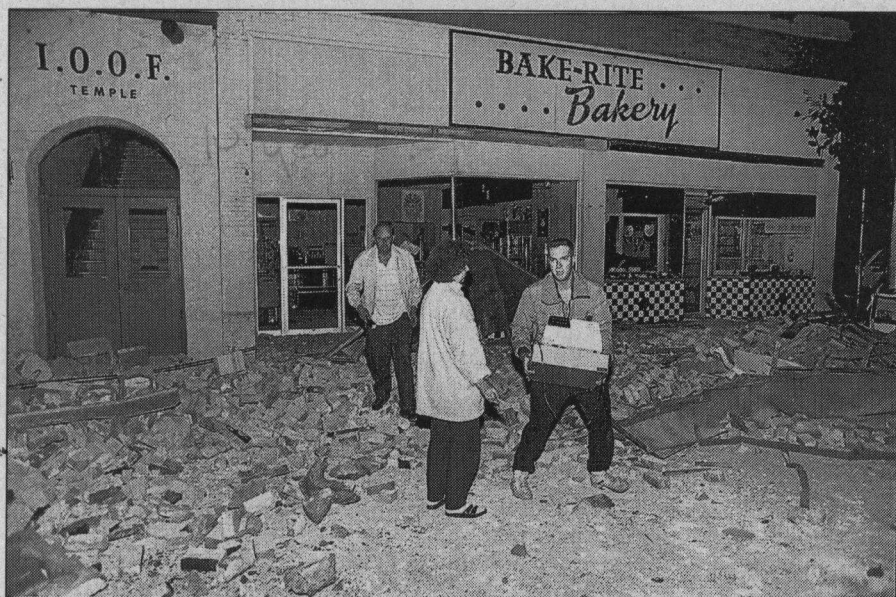
Buildings crumbled downtown. Elida Ledesma Ortega, 44, was killed by falling bricks as she shielded her grandson outside the Bake-Rite Bakery across from the City Plaza at Union and East Beach streets. In neighborhoods, homes slipped from their foundations, 300 were destroyed, another 1,500 damaged. Even now, the aftermath can be seen in vacant lots on the 300 and 400 blocks of Main Street, where rebuilding has stalled.

Still, to those new to Santa Cruz County's fastest growing city and to the roughly 40 percent of Watsonville's population that is 25 and younger, the signs are less visible, the buildings that replaced damaged structures, the only ones they know. Among the young, that was a monumental event to their parents is less significant to them.

Tuesday, Watsonville High School held an earthquake drill. Two days later, 17-year-old Watsonville High School students Daniel Ortiz, Erick Brigham and Thalia Gonzalez talked about what they knew about Loma Prieta. As it turned out, very little.

"I asked (my parents) about it once," Ortiz said. They said it was pretty bad, a really shocking moment in their lives and ever since they are self-conscious about earthquakes, more aware of them. I really don't know anything about it except it was really big and things started falling."

Gonzalez said living near the San Andreas fault, she recognizes it's a place where that could happen." But she and other students aren't too worried. Students didn't take the drill seriously, said Brigham. Maybe they would have, if they knew more of the details, he said.



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

Bake-Rite Bakery merchants remove the cash register from their downtown Watsonville store across from the Watsonville Plaza hours after the earthquake struck at 5:04 p.m. The building at East Beach and Union streets was deemed unsafe and demolished.

"It could help if people remembered," Brigham said.

## Memory ingrained

For Dennis Osmer, then a councilman, the memory is still vivid. He said the city was unprepared for the destruction. He recalled running the five blocks home from a muffler shop on Lincoln Street, making sure his family was safe, and then packing up tools and heading downtown. He spent the rest of the night fixing things, including the Police Department's generator.

"One of the strangest things is you think you would be prepared, and you think you would have help," Osmer said. "A week before the earthquake, I was at a presentation at Fort Ord, and the commanding general said we can put a fully armed brigade anywhere in the world in four hours. It took them four days to get to Watsonville."

Police Chief Manny Solano was a narcotics investigator at the time, working on countywide task force. He was heading home on Highway 17 during the quake and thought at first the boulders bouncing across the road were



BILL LOVEJOY — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

A rack of shoes from a downtown clothing store, with some of its display still in place, was bounced onto the Pacific Avenue sidewalk during the quake.

caused by a landslide. Not until he saw smoke rising from Santa Cruz did he begin to realize the scope of the disaster.

In Watsonville, he found a similar scene of destruction. At the police station, communications were being handled from a van in the station's parking lot. Police cars were in short supply so officers' personal motorcycles were put into service. At night, he said, officers patrolled a city darkened with the loss of streetlights as thousands of residents huddled in tent cities.

## Ready or not

The city learned a few lessons from the earthquake, as well as from destructive Pajaro River

flood of 1995, Solano said. Its disaster plan is stronger as a result. Redundant systems have been put in place. Stricter codes govern construction, and many of the most vulnerable building replaced or reinforced.

Nevertheless, Solano predicts serious problems when the next earthquake hits — and he has no doubt it will happen — "just because we have a very densely populated city." He said people need to be able to survive on their own for four or five days, with enough water, food and medications.

"We do hope the buildings stand up," Solano said. "But Mother Nature plays a role, and things do happen, things do fail."



# Vision

FROM PAGE 1

deeply committed to their own interests. Fights ensued over building heights, traffic patterns, parking capacity, open space, historic preservation and housing.

But a quarter century later, members say they are proud of the work they did and that downtown looks and feels much as they envisioned. As then-Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt put it in 1990, "We are going to have to embrace a lot of contradictions. It's sort of Zen planning."

Wormhoudt, who died four days after the 20th anniversary of the earthquake in 2009, was an original co-chair of Vision Santa Cruz, a non-profit public benefit corporation that met twice monthly for several years. Original members eventually dropped out and new ones joined, but the group remained a diverse body appointed in a balanced way by the City Council and business leaders.

"All walks of life were represented," said Ceil Cirillo, the city's now-retired redevelopment director. "There was a very intentional composition."

Yet, "the gang of 36," as it was dubbed, discovered a lot of common ground early on.

Larry Pearson, owner of Pacific Cookie Co. who chaired the group in its final two years, said, "That terrible injury that our city had suffered gave us a place to stand together because we all loved it. It is one of the most important things I've ever been involved with in my life."

## Exhausting process

At 5:04 p.m. on Oct. 17, 1989, the San Andreas Fault that runs along the eastern edge of Santa Cruz County shifted, creating damage to life and property the likes of which have not been experienced since in Northern California.

Sixty-three people died in total, including six within Santa Cruz County and one county resident



BILL LOVEJOY — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

The magnitude of the Loma Prieta quake registers upon Pacific Garden Mall visitors minutes after the 1989 temblor laid waste to shops and left the street cluttered with bricks. A 36-member group called Vision Santa Cruz authored the principles that guided rebuilding.

Cruz Women's Health Center, said she was mentally exhausted.

"I had to make myself stop memorizing the map of downtown," said Benedetto, now assistant director for equal employment opportunity at UCSC. "I didn't think it was healthy."

Focused on housing and other social issues, Benedetto said she joined committees with bankers and businessmen to be a moderating influence and expand her own horizons.

"I made a lot of good friends," she said. "It helped me to grow as a person even if it drove me crazy."

One of the first big decisions made by the group was what to call itself.

According to minutes from the first meetings, which are contained in the Special Collections archive at UCSC, member Ron

Lorenzo River waterfront and south of Laurel Street.

Those guiding principles represented a big change from the Pacific Garden Mall, a virtual arboretum that had defined the street for the 20 years preceding the quake. The temblor hit just when the city was beginning to study improvements to the garden design, which many saw as overgrown, leading to a decrease in commerce and increase in what reports at the time called "street people."

"The trees themselves were very densely planted; it was very dark on the ground," said Vision Santa Cruz member William Rubel, founder of Stone Soup. "You couldn't see store fronts from across the street."

But others thought the garden concept was worth saving.

"I felt there was a bias



THOMAS MENDOZA — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Charlie Eadie and Vision Santa Cruz member Cynthia Mathews, who now serves on the City Council, discuss the Vision Santa Cruz work that led to the Downtown Recovery Plan for Santa Cruz after the Loma Prieta earthquake 15 years ago.

said of the mall. "People were starting to stay away, and it was staring to show flat retail sales or maybe a declining a bit."

Eadie said there was a "near rebellion of down-

role — trying to get people to trust each other for a prolonged period of time. There was a lot of cooperation, and I am certainly proud of that."

Rubel, the Stone Soup

## VISION SANTA CRUZ

The first meeting of the 36-member Vision Santa Cruz group that created the First Principles for downtown rebuilding took place Jan. 11 at the Civic Auditorium. The original members were:

- Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt (co-chair)
- Councilman Joe Ghio
- Councilwoman Jane Yokoyama
- Former Mayor Mike Rotkin
- Former Mayor Bruce Van Allen
- Susan Mauriello, Santa Cruz County administrative officer
- Phil Boyce, chairman of Pacific Western Bank
- Mike Schmidt, manager of Bank of America
- Harvey Nickelson, president of Coast Commercial Bank
- Neal Coonerty, Bookshop Santa Cruz owner
- Cynthia Mathews,



ville also was hard hit, as were several communities in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where the epicenter was located in the Forest of Nisene Marks.

City and county leaders will join scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey and UC Santa Cruz for a 25th anniversary commemoration at 10 a.m. Friday in Memorial Plaza at Pacific Avenue and Front Street, Santa Cruz.

Many people recall exactly where they were and what they were doing when the earth shook violently for 15 seconds. But few may know the process that unfolded afterward to determine what downtown would look like and what purposes it would serve.

The relative speed with which Vision Santa Cruz created the basic principles of rebuilding, then the specific recovery plan a year later, hastened redevelopment in a town that is located in a highly regulated environment and better known now for delay rather than expedience.

Twenty-five years later, only one parcel on the main part of Pacific Avenue — the former Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Co. location where employees Robin Ortiz and Shawn McCormick died — remains undeveloped.

Over the course of 300 meetings and with an initial budget of \$500,000, members of Vision Santa Cruz hashed out high-level issues in the beginning before getting deep into the weeds, forming committees and subcommittees to evaluate questions in granular detail. A host of consultants helped over the years, most notably the San Francisco-based urban design firm, ROMA, whose imprint is seen in how Pacific Avenue looks today — from its wide sidewalks and outdoor cafes to building heights and setbacks that welcome sunlight.

After the process was over, Vision Santa Cruz member Ciel Benedetto, then director of the Santa

Cymballine Records, suggested Center City Foundation. When that was rejected, a naming committee was formed and later offered up Restore Santa Cruz, Revive Santa Cruz, City Center Project, Renaissance Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz Partnership Inc. and Santa Cruz 2000.

Charlie Eadie, a city planner assigned to provide staffing to the group, said "partnership" evoked a business relationship that some members shunned, while "restore" appealed to those who wanted the garden mall concept to return. "Vision" won out, Eadie said, "because it was forward looking."

Cynthia Mathews, a member representing the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust who has gone on to serve five terms on the City Council, said, "Once the group got appointed and got through the naming, there was an urgent shared sense of purpose."

## The vision

In May 1990, after its first four months, Vision Santa Cruz presented to the council the First Principles. Thirty-one demolished buildings eventually would be rebuilt or repaired.

The group said buildings should retain their own individual character — the previous downtown was also a hodgepodge of architectural styles — and that structures would be two or three stories high, although five stories would be allowed under certain circumstances. Members wanted to ensure there would be proper density and scale without shading open spaces.

Public spaces also were paramount to creating a "socially active and pedestrian-oriented downtown," and bicycle and public transit should be emphasized, according to the Downtown Recovery Plan. The rebuilding also created new housing opportunities, including for affordable small units, on Pacific Avenue and throughout the downtown, along the San

mail, said Ralph Meyberg, a Vision Santa Cruz member who represented downtown neighbors. "There was a feeling expressed that if it became more 'Main Street,' it would deal with more social problems. I didn't quite agree with that."

Meyberg said the pedestrian-oriented concept nonetheless promised in the Downtown Recovery Plan has not fully emerged, with the city choosing not to close streets to vehicle traffic often enough. Overall, however, Meyberg said, "The fact of it is that businesses and social groups realized the interdependence of a community and they really did want to work together and did work together."

## Getting there

Eadie, now a land-use consultant, painted a picture of the climate under which Vision Santa Cruz began its work.

The community was still sore over the city-approved demolition of Cooper House, the iconic hub of civic life at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Cooper Street. A debate was about to get underway about saving the St. George Hotel while other parcels lay in rubble.

With Pacific Avenue cordoned off for safety, merchants demanded access to their former businesses to retrieve cash and business records while residents of apartments above commercial buildings sought what remained of their personal belongings. Structural engineers worked around the clock to evaluate buildings.

"People were worried about more deaths or injuries," Eadie said. "It was very dangerous."

The business community set up a tent city for merchants ahead of the all-important holiday shopping season. Retailers had suffered before the quake, many closing up at 5 p.m. — a blessing, as it turned out on that fateful Tuesday.

"It was still a charming place, but it was in need of a serious uplifting," Eadie

thought anything was lost that (members) needed to care about. That is reflected in the success of the street — how do we remake the street completely with almost all new buildings and make it so it has another 100 years?"

"Suddenly, on that Friday, President Bush shows up and the Secret Service are on top of buildings," he said. "The next day there was a hearing at City Hall because merchants felt there was this cognitive dissonance."

There also was friction over varying visions. Just eight years earlier, control of city government had been wrestled away from a largely pro-business council by a pro-environmental, growth-conscious majority.

"Their perception of it was that Santa Cruz was at risk of not recovering because there was longstanding animosity about the old-guard business community and new environmental movement," Eadie said of advisors to the city. "That is fundamental to why you had to have Vision Santa Cruz."

Former Mayor Mike Rotkin said it was important for him, Pearson, former Mayor Bruce Van Allen and other Vision Santa Cruz members to work behind the scenes to quell tensions between factions. Advocates for social services, open space and housing were bumping heads with business and property owners who were financially invested in creating an economically viable commercial climate.

"I was not lobbying for my point of view," Rotkin said. "We needed to get this process going."

During his year on Vision Santa Cruz, member Harvey Nickelson, then president of Coast Commercial Bank, shared his expertise about the lending environment but also tried to heal political divides.

"It was worse than herding cats in that environment," he said. "Getting to the level of trusting each other was our major

think anything was lost that (members) needed to care about. That is reflected in the success of the street — how do we remake the street completely with almost all new buildings and make it so it has another 100 years?"

## The final product

The recovery plan that came out of the First Principles called for downtown to be a regional destination for shopping, cultural and civic events. It was meant to complement the idyllic natural setting in which it is ensconced: a neighbor to the mountains, forests, river and ocean.

"The architecture captures the best of the city's past while integrating new buildings into a coherent and visually appealing downtown," according to the plan's vision statement. "As a result, the area strikes a balance between a successful modern business center and an environmentally attractive and active public space."

Cirillo, the former redevelopment director who implemented the plans, said, "We recognized early on we weren't going to be the family shopping center that 41st Avenue was providing (in Capitola). So I always marketed downtown as 'speciality' — the shopping, social, cultural and entertainment center for the county."

Matthew Thompson, architect of the St. George Hotel replica completed in 1992, said the work of Vision Santa Cruz was critical to providing clear expectations among builders, property owners and merchants. The city decided early on to allow owners to rebuild their same square footage, but the Vision Santa Cruz work also ensured developers that, if their individual plans met guidelines, they would get a permit.

Benedetto, the UCSC official, wished there were more gardens than concrete downtown, and she disagreed with straightening out the meandering street that made way-

for large planters. But she said the vision obviously has been successful considering the hustle and bustle downtown.

"I think we've done fairly well," she said. "Just try to go down there on a Friday night."

- Charles Canfield, Santa Cruz Seaside Co. and downtown property owner
- Louis Rittenhouse, property owner and Downtown Association president
- Ron Rhodes, district manager for PG&E representative (co-chair)
- Roy Rydell, Pacific Garden Mall architect
- William Rubel, Downtown Association
- Denise Holbert, Cultural Council
- Eugene Van Den Heuvel, Sheet Metal Workers Union
- Norm Shockley, owner of Shockley's jewelry store
- Ron Prilliman, owner of Cymballine Records
- Larry Pearson, owner of Pacific Cookie Co.
- James Pepper, UC Santa Cruz professor of environmental studies
- John Lisher, director of Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce
- Scott Galloway, Metro transit director
- Steve Barasi, manager of Gottschalks
- Ciel Benedetto, director of Santa Cruz Women's Health Center
- Jerry Fitzgerald, owner of the ID building
- Ken Haber, owner of Haber's Home Furnishings
- Ralph Meyberg, member of Downtown Neighbors
- Julia Anthony, St. George Hotel resident
- Stephanie Hauk, special assistant to then UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Robert Stevens
- Laura Perry, Santa Cruz Planning Commission member
- Bert Rees, property owner
- Nancy Hendee, business consultant
- Brad Neily, advocate for the disabled
- Patrick Meyer, counselor