



NOWHERE TO GO BUT UP What fate awaits the vacant lot on the corner of Church Street and Pacific Avenue? Plans include a combination of residential and commercial space, as well as additional parking for the city.

Stitching up Santa Cruz

As the last of the earthquake's rubble is swept up, the city looks to the future | by Hunter Holcombe

Earth quake - Ten years later

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It took only 15 seconds for the earth to humble the buildings of downtown Santa Cruz from their lofty aspirations, to snap their steel and concrete spines and reduce them to crippled restaurants and amputated shops.

Now, 15 years after the infamous 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the heart of the city is still struggling to fully stand back up on its feet. It is almost there, but, like the shriveled gums left behind from missing teeth, two sunken lots still put a kink in the smile of downtown Santa Cruz.

At the corner of Church Street and Pacific Avenue, a high fence fails to fully veil a massive weed-covered pit. And a bridge at the northern tip of Pacific Avenue gives spectators a more than adequate view of the basketball court-sized lot that is a mid-night canvas to graffiti artists and an oversized trash bin to litterers. If the city has its way, however, these last few tributes to the destructive power of Mother Nature will soon be capped, and a long era of earthquake reconstruction will come to an end.

"Once these lots are finished, that's pretty much the last of the recovery downtown from the earthquake," says Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin. "But that doesn't mean there isn't still plenty to do."

Veteran residents have witnessed the long meta-

morphosis of the downtown, which was largely reduced to rubble on Oct. 17, 1989, when a 6.9 earthquake thoroughly rattled the Central Coast and Bay Area. While many buildings were destroyed from the immediate shaking, many more had to be pulled down due to structural damage.

"In 15 seconds a third of the buildings downtown were lost," Rotkin says. "But another third had to be taken down, and the last third needed major repairs."

Many residents and merchants have wondered and complained that the last two sites, both major eyesores, have still not been developed, especially considering their placement on the prime real estate of Pacific Avenue.

Government is fed up with it as well. Just last week, the city council demanded Ron Lau, the owner of the lot just north of the Lulu Carpenters café, to reach a deal with the developer, Bolton Hill, within 90 days. Otherwise, the city warns, it will take control of the lot by order of eminent domain.

Plans for the lot, which will be combined with adjacent city-controlled property, include a combination of residential, commercial and parking. The owner of Clouds Downtown, Lou Caviglia, is looking at putting in a two-story restaurant.

At the Church and Pacific site, owner Louis Rittenhouse, a former city council member, has plans for an office and retail complex. Having received permits to build years ago, Rittenhouse says he has been unable to find tenants due to the sour economy. However, construction on the site could begin as soon as this spring.

The effort to remake Santa Cruz has been led by the city Redevelopment Agency, which was originally created in 1956 after another natural disaster, the San Lorenzo River flood of 1955. After the earthquake in 1989, the agency was revamped to rebuild the city, and executive director Ceil Cirillo was brought on board. Having overseen all of the reconstruction since the earthquake, Cirillo says that most of the downtown was finished around 1995. Afterwards, the agency began to take on a multitude of other projects.

"The agency's activities were really broadened then," Cirillo says. "We were working on affordable housing, improving flood control and the 'undergrounding' of Mission Street."

Cirillo adds that, while the primary job of rebuilding from the earthquake is almost finished, the agency is keeping itself plenty busy. Cirillo cites the lower Ocean St. beach area, as well as places along