

\$1.4 MILLION IN REPAIRS

Veterans Hall will require costly fix

Veterans

Community center unlikely to reopen for months, if not years

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SANTA CRUZ — The Veterans Memorial Building, closed in January because of structural problems, will cost \$1.4 million to repair and remain shut for at least four more months — and probably much longer — according to a new engineering report commissioned by the county.

"The good news is it's repairable," said Nancy Gordon, the county's general services director. "But it's not an inexpensive fix."

The report, prepared by Street-er Group Inc. of Soquel, details several problems at the nearly 80-year-old community hall, which was put off limits to the public after stucco was reported falling from the building's facade. The main issues, according to the report, are fractured concrete columns in the auditorium, shaky soil beneath the foundation and insufficient seismic retrofitting throughout.

"The building currently presents increased risk of life or injury to the occupants of the building in the event of a significant earthquake," the report reads.

The Jan. 21 closure has left not only veterans but several community groups who use the county-owned facility for classes or shows in search of other venues. Meanwhile, the Veterans Service Office, which provided assistance to former military personnel at the site, has been moved to the county government campus on Emeline Avenue.

County administrators say the time frame for reopening the Vets Hall remains unclear. While the engineering report suggests fixing the problems will take four to six months, the county needs approval first from the state, because of the building's historic status, and that could take longer.

And then there's the money. Finding the \$1.4 million that the

VETS HALL

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engineering reports cites as the estimated repair cost won't be easy in a county budget that has been hit hard by the economic downturn.

"The main activities we're going to be doing now is looking for funding," Gordon said.

The county, which had originally sought to end its contract with the non-profit group managing the building, decided this week to renew the group's \$14,000 quarterly contract and recruit its members for fundraising.

The Vets Hall Web site, maintained by the management group, states opti-

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mistically that the building will reopen this summer, despite the recent report's findings. Meanwhile, boarded-up doors and no-entry signs mar the once regal landmark.

The engineering report, which echoed a preliminary assessment that also recommended closing the building, did little to console veterans angry that the building is not yet opened.

"There's already been plenty of opportunity to solve the problem," said Santa Cruz attorney Ralph

Boroff, who is representing veterans in a legal challenge to the closure. "If you genuinely believe there is a problem, do something about it. If you don't let us back in."

Based on an independent engineering study, the United Veterans Council of Santa Cruz County filed suit against the county, alleging the closure was unwarranted and demanding the building be reopened.

Last week, the court declined to take immediate action on the group's request,

but scheduled a hearing on the matter for April 28.

The Veterans Council, which represents eight local veterans groups and their several hundred members, has established a defense fund to support the push to get back into the hall.

"It could be three years from the time it originally closed to when it gets opened again," said Bob Patton, a member of the Bill Motto Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5888. "This closure is not necessary."