

# Fifteen minutes was all they got

earthquake 1989 - City of SC  
**L**OCAL ENGINEER John Frazer stuck his neck out for business occupants of the quake-crippled Hihn building on Pacific Avenue and Lincoln and probably saved them a half-million dollars.

Like a referee, his was a judgment call and like a referee, he's taken a lot of boos.

Many merchants maintain it was their right to take chances with entering buildings red-tagged for demolition, to remove objects essential to their livelihood. There were terrible frustrations. Lawyers had information for up to 60 active cases stored in computer disks; an investment broker had details of holdings of 400 customers.

A team of some 40 structural engineers from the state Office of Emergency Services in Sacramento inspected the downtown.

They did not enter the Hihn building. But they concluded that it had extensive damage to the exterior, and recommended that no one should be allowed to enter.

A howl arose from many of the office renters. One was arrested attempting to cross police lines to get to his records. Peter Gergen, who operated the Hallmark shop, said the situation smacked of a police state.

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Building owner Gloria Welsh, known for standing up for her tenants, obtained an injunction, stalling demolition so she could hire her own engineer to make a judgment. She hired John Frazer, who holds a masters in structural engineering.

"The state engineers were right on, the building was 60 percent damaged and should come down," said Frazer.

Frazer took a chance to make that extra structural examination and climbed the rubble-strewn stairs off Lincoln to the second floor, spending 15 minutes making three main observations.

"The Hihn was built in the 1880s. Over the years, the mortar between the bricks had turned virtually to powder, so what you had was two stories of bricks just sitting on top of the other.

Also, exterior "X" cracks indicated the sides were failing from being pulled from various directional forces. But Frazer found the interior in better shape.

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"The back section was not as damaged. I was mainly checking the walls. There are three types.

"The most important are the bearing walls that support the weight of the building, the skeleton. There are shear walls, designed to resist horizontal movement in high winds and earthquakes. These can be combined with bearing walls.

Then there are the partition walls that mainly divide spaces and may not be relevant to building strength.

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Frazer made the decision that most occupants could enter their offices and remove their bare essentials and he also informed city officials of his decision.

He also set the time inside at 15 minutes.

One occupant bitterly asked, "What's so magical about 15 minutes?" Why not a half hour or an hour?

Frazer explained his logic.

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"At first I was going to allow only 10 minutes each. But I reasoned that during the first two minutes they would be nervous and disoriented. They might try to rush in and injure themselves.

"Fifteen minutes would give them more calm thinking time. On the other hand, if I had allowed a half hour, they would start bringing items out that were unimportant and easily replaced. I had to stop one party from doing this. Another tried to reach the basement, which no one had checked.

"Parties went in one office at a time. It took two and a half hours and I felt that I was tempting fate."

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"People complained about their rights, but it was my judgment call that if one death or injury would have occurred, the city would have become extremely conservative and prevented other red-tagged buildings from having their contents salvaged.

"I don't want to pretend to be an expert in this kind of situation. It was a tight balance between being a good guy or a villain. It was one of the biggest chances I have ever taken. You know who was really great, was Gloria Welsh. She was taking a chance also."

Today, the Hihn is but a vacant lot on the mall.

*Wally Trabing's column appears in the Sentinel Tuesday through Friday and Sunday.*