

Rebuilding Santa Cruz's Living Room

Construction of Downtown Streetscape Set for Completion

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By Heath Maddox

WHY IS the reconstruction of downtown Santa Cruz taking so long? Three years after the Loma Prieta earthquake dealt a devastating blow to downtown, this question is commonly asked by students, locals and visitors alike.

According to most people who have been active in the reconstruction process, the answer is quite simple: this is simply how long it takes to carry out a project of this magnitude.

"The public's frustration over the length of the reconstruction process is based out of a lack of knowledge of the scope of the size of the project," says Patricia E. Calvert, Executive Director of the Downtown Association. "City council has taken a lot of flack. They have experienced unfounded criticism. The council has been very dedicated [to rebuilding] since the quake. Their energies have been focused with great intensity. However, the city doesn't build towns. That isn't their job. They build infrastructure."

Calvert says one difficulty has been the original design of the Pacific Garden Mall. "Although many people loved it, it really didn't work very well for commercial interests," she says.

The mall was considered by many to be in a state of decline even before the quake, according to Jim Pepper, a Professor of Environmental Studies at UCSC who also holds professional degrees in landscape architecture and city planning. "Over twenty years old," explains Pepper, "the landscape on the Pacific Garden Mall had matured. Many of the trees were not deciduous, thus creating a heavily shaded atmosphere all year round." Deciduous trees lose their leaves in fall.

Pepper describes the downtown area as the "public living room," and says Santa Cruz's began to decline in the 1980s. Ronald Reagan's massive cuts to social welfare programs led to increased vagrancy and homelessness. Many mental health care recipients were put on the streets. The landscape of the Pacific Garden Mall, with its many alcoves and planters, says Pepper, made it easy for vagrants and transients to "occupy territory" or "stake a claim". As a result, he says, local businesses "took it in the chops" because customers, especially women, began to feel unsafe.

Pepper makes it clear that he believes transiency and vagrancy are different from homelessness. "Hanging out is not a function of homelessness," he says.

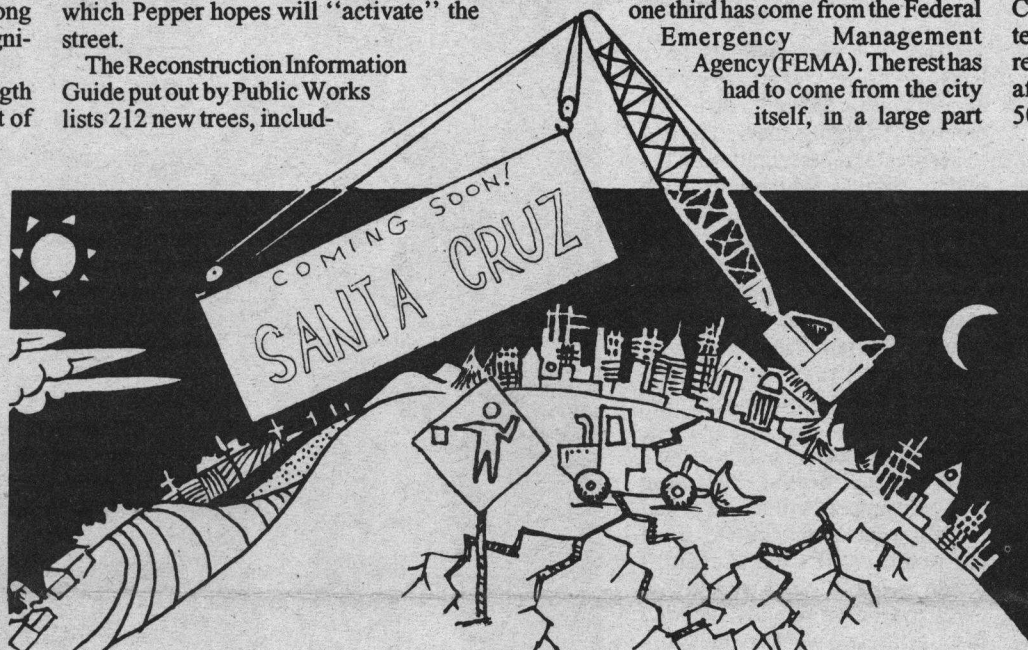
Pepper says he can empathize with public frustration over the planning and reconstruction process. "Because we lost so much in the earthquake, in such a dramatic and sudden manner, there is a strong desire to see [the mall] come back as it was," he says. Pepper describes this desire as a natural "period of bereavement, a longing to return to the past - as things were." But he says he is confident that the new downtown will be just as popular and will maintain a better business environment.

Pepper says the purpose of the new design

is not necessarily to make downtown less hospitable and that, "the idea is not to drive out the poor health, but increase the [good] health." For Pepper, the challenge was to "make downtown more attractive and more vital without losing the ambience and places to sit."

Both Calvert and Pepper are enthusiastic about the new, wider sidewalks downtown. The east side of Pacific Avenue will have sidewalks as wide as 25 feet in some places to make room for European style cafe seating which Pepper hopes will "activate" the street.

The Reconstruction Information Guide put out by Public Works lists 212 new trees, includ-



ing flowering cherry, birch, ash, and pin oak. In front of World Savings Bank will be the Community Tree, a large atlas cedar to be decorated for the Christmas holidays every year. Nearly all the trees are deciduous, thus allowing more sunlight along the street in winter months. At maturity, the trees will have their lowest branches at 12 feet, making storefronts more visible, and allowing more illumination from streetlights.

The guide also lists benches of wood and wrought iron, drinking fountains, Victorian style streetlights, kiosks, sculpture gardens on raised platforms with railings and a granite earthquake memorial compass in the sidewalk near the post office that will all be part of the renovated downtown.

The kind of planning required to redesign the commercial hub of a city of 50,000 people does not take place over night, points out Chris Schneider, Assistant Director of Public Works.

"You can't just go and build something. You have to know what you are building. The uses have to be determined in order to determine the infrastructure. There has to be a big consensus building process. All this takes time," says Schneider. Public Works is generally responsible for the construction of

public areas of the city, and has managed the design and construction of all the streetscape and utilities in the new downtown.

"Once we had a plan," says Schneider, "we basically replaced everything between Laurel Street and Water Street. Water, sewer, electric and phone cables, everything."

Schneider also says that since the city is not exempt from the effects of the current recession, money has been hard to come by for all parties involved. Of the approximately \$9 million the city has spent so far, roughly one third has come from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The rest has had to come from the city itself, in a large part

from the half cent earthquake sales tax local consumers pay.

The private sector downtown has been especially hard-hit. Since the quake, Santa Cruz has lost at least 100 businesses and complete recovery could take "quite a long time" according to Calvert.

Unlike the early 80s, which saw a boom in speculative office space construction, the early 90s are a different time for builders to get loans. Banks are taking fewer risks, requiring leases to be signed before they agree to loan, and even then they charge high rates of interest.

Despite the economic uncertainty of the near future, it is an exciting time to be around downtown. The last section of Pacific Avenue was scheduled to be paved last Monday. Most of the sidewalks, about half of the Victorian style street lights, and 90 percent of the trees will be in place by Thanksgiving, with the sidewalks being com-

plete by mid-December. The Locust Garage, the city's new \$7 million multi-story parking facility will open within a matter of days. Schneider speculates that Public Works' job will be 99.9 percent finished by January.

All of the progress Santa Cruz has made to date would not have been possible without

the hard work of community volunteers. Over all, Calvert says she believes the best thing to come out of the Loma Prieta quake has been the "incredible community involvement in the planning and reconstruction process." Calvert says Vision Santa Cruz and the Phoenix Partnership are two examples of community support.

Vision Santa Cruz is a joint public/private non-profit organization which came to life about 6 months after the disaster to formulate a recovery plan for the business community. Calvert says the thousands of hours volunteered by locals shaped the way the city responded to the quake and will continue to affect how the city will function for the next 50-100 years.

Tony Hill, who serves as a consultant to several local developers on issues of cultural diversity, recognizes that the Santa Cruz community contributed significantly to Vision Santa Cruz. However, he says a broader segment could have been involved by implementing "specific outreach efforts." Hill says Vision Santa Cruz represented mostly business interests, and that perhaps a diversification of interests was "not as aggressively pursued as it could have been." Hill concedes that in crisis no community is as broad-minded as it might be under better circumstances.

The Phoenix Partnership was a non-profit partnership which sprang up immediately following the quake to house the 47 businesses whose buildings were destroyed or condemned after the quake in the large white pavilions. The pavilions were in place before Christmas of 1989. Without the needed holiday income, many more retail shops would have folded. Calvert says only about nine businesses remain in the tents, and that they should be gone by the end of November.

The community has rallied to help businesses move into their new homes as well. Last week, about 150 enthusiastic book lovers of all ages turned out at Bookshop Santa Cruz to carry boxes of books between the pavilion on Cedar Street and its spacious new location in the freshly rebuilt St. George Hotel. Bookshop Santa Cruz offered free refreshments and was donating \$2.00 an hour per volunteer to local charities. Half of the proceeds went to the Life Lab Science Program and half went to the Friends of the Library. Volunteer response was so overwhelming that what Bookshop Santa Cruz had anticipated to have been a three day project was finished in only one.

According to Pepper, it is because of this kind of community involvement that Santa Cruz has come as far as it has since October 17, 1989. "We have done remarkably well under the constraining economic circumstances," says Pepper who adds that Santa Cruz is a lot further along than Whittier and Coalinga, two cities which suffered massive quake damage longer ago than Santa Cruz.

Though Pacific Avenue will be open for Thanksgiving, the official opening ceremony and parade will be on Saturday, December 5. Pepper encourages UCSC students to come out and give the city a boost.

"The cherry trees will be in bloom for February," says Pepper, "Spring will be outrageous on Pacific Avenue."

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