

Local

VEF Earthquake - 1989 Watsonville RP 4/12/90

High school's main building may have to close

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The Oct. 17 earthquake caused the whole second floor of the main building at Watsonville High School to separate, and weakened the ceiling and balcony in the auditorium to the point where they could collapse in a milder quake, a report made public last night revealed.

The report, which was presented at a study session of the Pajaro Valley school district board of trustees, indicated that the building suffered much more damage than preliminary inspections turned up in January. At first, structural engineers thought the exterior wall on the front of the building had suffered most of the damage, but determined that the building on the whole was in relatively good shape.

But after further tests were conducted, it was discovered that the concrete in all the exterior walls was of poor quality, which exaggerated the damage by the earthquake. Art Weatherbe, one of the engineers for PJHM Architects of San Jose, the firm con-

tracted by the district to conduct the inspections, completed the latest survey of the building last week and found that the entire second floor shifted during the earthquake and had moved back into place.

The building was erected in 1917 and the concrete used was of a very low quality, said Weatherbe. He said such construction materials would not be allowed to be used today.

He said the earthquake caused huge cracks to open along the walls, but the building's structure had been weakening for many years.

"What damage was done by the earthquake just opened up a can of worms," he said.

He found several large cracks in the walls and weakened support beams. But the damage could be even more extensive than the latest findings indicate.

"There could also be other weakened parts which are hidden and therefore unobservable to us," the report said. "It is possible that another major earthquake could produce major damage to the

building structure."

Several holes were drilled into the walls to bring out samples of the concrete. In some samples, the report said, the concrete was of such poor quality that it broke into pieces.

The report said the building does not meet safety standards for

ing that the building is not safe, we should close down the building right now," board member Steve Knego said to Weatherbe. "We shouldn't allow students or faculty to go in there tomorrow morning. I don't want that liability on my head."

"The building is not safe," re-

'There is no question in my mind that someone will sue us if they are injured in that building.'

—Trustee Jeff Hancock

public school buildings and recommended that students be moved out as soon as possible. It also advised that the auditorium be closed.

Although the report is not official until further tests are done to the interior walls and it is formally submitted to the district and signed by Weatherbe, its implications are already clear.

"If you are going on record say-

sponded Weatherbe. But he emphasized that the criterion he uses to determine whether a school building is safe is whether it passes federal and state building code regulations. In this case, he said, the building does not.

A copy of the report was given to Tony Calvo, principal at Watsonville High, yesterday. He immediately ordered the auditorium closed.

"It was a blow to me when I got

the report," Calvo said.

He met with several faculty members after he received the report to inform them about the status of the building. There are 12 classrooms in the building and several administrative and academic offices.

Hank Hendrickson, the district's director of maintenance and operations, recommended that students be moved to 12 mobile units that would be located on the school's property. The district already has six of these mobile classrooms at the school that could be used and six more can be brought in from the Modesto area in about two weeks.

But the problem would be providing power to the units. According to Hendrickson, getting the equipment that would relay electricity to the units could take as long as six weeks.

The district may not have that much time. Weatherbe will be finished conducting the tests on the interior walls by next week. He said he expected to find the same poor quality concrete there, too.

It would take him two more

weeks to submit his official report. Once the district receives that signed report stating that the building is unsafe, it would have to close the building because it would be liable for sending students into a building that has failed to meet safety code regulations.

"There is no question in my mind that someone will sue us if they are injured in that building," said trustee Jeff Hancock.

He suggested that the district's insurance carrier provide written assurance that it would assume responsibility for legal damages the district could incur.

The board decided to follow Hendrickson's recommendations and start preparing the mobile units immediately.

When the final report is submitted by Weatherbe, it will include estimated costs of rehabilitating the building and construction costs of erecting a new one. Superintendent Jim Baker hopes the building will be restored instead of demolished.

"It is the mother ship of the community," he said. "I think we should keep it."

Another quake victim?

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R-P file photo/Diane Varni

Tests on Watsonville High School's main building have revealed more earthquake damage than previously suspected, and the concrete

used to build it is apparently of poor quality. The building may have to be closed. Story on page 13.