

DOWNTOWN

County endorses Vets Hall repairs

Veterans

Cost of project balloons
to \$3.4 million

By JASON HOPPIN

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SANTA CRUZ — County veterans have called a cease-fire in their fight with the county over the status of the Veterans Memorial Building on Front Street after the county agreed to spend \$3.4 million to refurbish it.

The building, closed since early 2010, needs extensive renovations, according to county consultants. The pricey project — more than twice initial estimates — includes a new roof, new electrical system, new boiler and replacing much of the basement. Construction wouldn't begin until next year, with a grand reopening unlikely until early 2013.

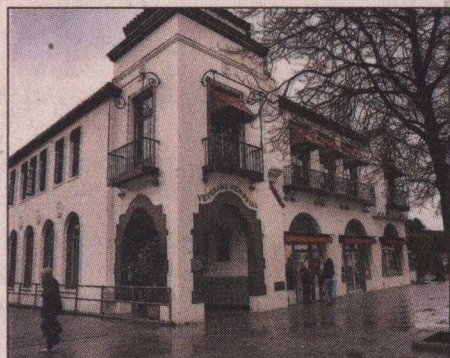
Despite arguing for months that problems with the building were not as extensive as the county represented — even seeking out their own engineering advice — veterans were comforted by Tuesday's development.

"We're going to stop hollering at them and kicking down their doors," smiled Bob Patton, president of the United Veterans Council of Santa Cruz County. "For now, at least."

The building was shuttered after crumbling concrete and other problems were discovered. Since then, some veterans have voiced outrage over the closure of the historic 1932 building, the lengthy process for assessing the problem and the county's offer of alternative accommodations, even filing suit over the latter.

The building has been a traditional gathering place for vets, serving as both a meeting place and a one-stop shop to connect veterans with services. Veterans groups

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ROBINSON KUNTZ/SENTINEL FILE

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors agreed Tuesday to repair the Veterans Memorial Building at a cost of \$3.4 million.

VETERANS

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have been meeting since the closure at different locations including Santa Cruz's Loud-en Nelson Community Center.

The plan likely comes as a relief to the county, almost as much as it does to veterans.

Veterans have been mainstays at county board meetings, complaining loudly that they've been mistreated despite strong comments from the county's engineering consultants that the building is unsafe to occupy.

"We're excited to be able to move forward," said Nancy Gordon, county director of general services, who has overseen the project.

Veterans, county staff and board members have clashed repeatedly over the project, including a tension-filled budget hearing last week when the plan was first unveiled. But Tuesday, old grudges were buried.

"We're really happy it's moving forward. That's the important thing," said Tim McCormick, vice president of the United Veterans Council.

The project will cost the county's general fund more than \$300,000 annually, and not all pieces of the financial deal are in place. For example, the county has to identify assets to use as collateral, since the building itself is already being used as collateral for a settlement over 1995 Pajaro River floods.

"This is a substantial amount of money," county Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello said.

Located on a busy downtown street between a bank and the post office, the building poses a complex set of challenges for construction crews, which will contribute to the lengthy construction schedule.

"Logistically, it's a real labor-intensive, challenging project," Gordon said.