

A school rises from ashes

By KATHERINE EDWARDS
Sentinel staff writer

SUMMIT — It took a brief convulsion of earth three years ago to destroy Loma Prieta Elementary School. Saturday there will be a happier kind of groundbreaking.

The Loma Prieta School District officially will begin construction on its new elementary school — an “earthquake-resistant” building that has taken years to win state approval.

“We don’t want to test it,” joked Superintendent Lee Tinder. “We’ve not invited Mother Nature to this

groundbreaking.”

The \$9 million project, scheduled to be completed by early 1994, will include 18 classrooms to house 350 elementary students and to provide extra space for the district’s middle school, which lost a wing of classrooms in the earthquake.

“It’s designed for future growth; we’re starting to get people back into the area,” Tinder said. “People are slowly rebuilding their homes, new families are moving in.”

The 620-student district was devastated by the 1989

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earthquake, centered just 4½ miles away from its two schools.

What followed in its wake were hard-learned lessons about water rationing and cramped quarters. Elementary students moved in at C.T. English Middle School across Summit Road, first in double sessions, later in their own camp of portable buildings.

“Every niche and habitat was full,” said Tinder.

While the district received emergency state and federal aid early on, in the months after the disaster local businesses and community service clubs were recruited to adopt classrooms and help pay costly leases on the portable school buildings.

Business manager June Salisbury said the district’s day-care provider “abandoned” the schools after the quake and the district had to scramble for money to run the service before and after school.

Other schools in and out of state sent money for the Loma Prieta children to spend on class materials and special events. Mental health agencies in Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties placed counselors at the schools for 18 months to work with parents and children.

“People kind of forgot how long we were in that situation,” said Salisbury.

But by far the biggest hurdle was the state bureaucracy, reluctant to allow the school to be rebuilt on ground laced with surface cracks.

Recently retired superintendent Ken Simpkins, dubbed “Captain Quake” for his relentless battles with state agencies, won the crucial support of state Sen. Leroy Greene, chairman of the state allocation board.

The state eventually approved building on land next

to the middle school. The extra expense for the earthquake-resistant design was picked up by the state, too.

“I’m really excited. I feel like it’s my school, even though I’m totally retired,” Simpkins said. “I’ll be the one behind the scenes doing a little dance when that thing opens.”

“It’s a milestone for the district,” Tinder said. “And a final chapter for the old school.”

Pieces of the elementary school, built in 1952, will be given away as mementos Saturday, in a commemorative plastic jar with a sprig of pine, tiny cones and a few dead yellow jackets — symbols of mountain life.

“If we distribute enough of these, we can get rid of the old school,” Tinder said, laughing.

As part of the construction project, the district plans to demolish the old elementary school and replace it with community playing fields, with an overpass linking them to the new school grounds.

Another community project is the “garden terrace” planned behind the schools, where an outdoor amphitheater will be built.

“The mountain community, they’re very collegial,” Tinder said. “They’re concerned about each other and the school is the nucleus. The (groundbreaking) is very symbolic, a significant part of mountain history. The timing, too, is a way of saying that ... problems are overcome. It’s a catharsis for some people.”

The ground-breaking celebration starts at 3:30 p.m. Saturday and is scheduled to finish at 5:04 p.m., the time the ’89 quake hit.

A community dance, dubbed “Shake, Rattle and Roll,” will follow at 8 p.m. at the Community Center on the school grounds.

The Loma Prieta School District is at 23800 Summit Road, about 3 miles southeast of Highway 17.

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