VETERANS MEMORIAL BUILDING

Rally becomes a celebration

Veterans celebrate planned Vets Hall fixes

Veterans

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At what was originally planned to be a rally to get the Veterans Memorial Building on Front Street reopened, about 10 veterans gathered outside the building singing songs, playing music and eating food to celebrate Independence Day.

The plan to protest the Vets Hall closure, which happened in early 2010, was called off after the county agreed to refurbish and reopen it for veterans in the next two years.

The 1932 building's doors were closed when major structural problems were found, making it unsafe to occupy.

The group flew an American flag where Pacific Avenue and Front Street meet, across the street from the shuttered Vets Hall. Participants sang songs like "Lili Marlene," a German love song that was popular among soldiers on both fronts during World War II, and a localized version of "God Bless America."

Part of their meeting was also to celebrate the company of World War II veteran Maurice Ricketts, said Laurie Morse, who served in Panama until 1986 and is now junior vice commander of Disabled American Veterans.

Ricketts, 88, sat in his roller scooter wearing sunglasses and a World War II veteran trucker hat as he sang with his companions.

"I was hoping more people would show up," he said, "but I think a lot of us have been discouraged by our building being closed up."

In 1940, when he was 17, Ricketts joined the National Guard in Wyoming and then went into the Navy during World War II. He served as a first class petty officer and torpedoes mate in the South Pacific and came to Santa Cruz in 1947. He said he still suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Army vet William Muir helped set up the Independence Day singalong and recorded some of Ricketts' statements about the gathering.

Muir worked at the Veterans Memorial Building for 11 years before it closed and now volunteers most of his time helping out his fellow veterans and making sure they're doing well, he said.

"These people are all like a family. We need each other and we help each other out," he said.

When the veterans gathered about 10 a.m., they marched down Pacific Avenue and were singing and holding their flag when police stopped to tell them they were almost in violation of obstructing traffic, or would be if they stopped walking, Muir said, but there were no further issues.

Members of Disabled American Veterans meet at Pacific Avenue and Front Street on Wednesdays at 10 a.m. to sing, share stories and get to know one another.