Older buildings face quake 'retrofitting'

Earth

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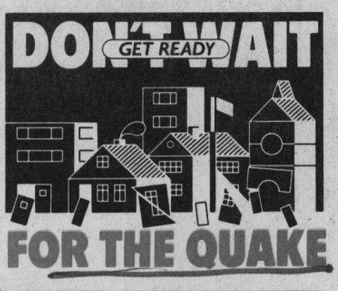
SANTA CRUZ — The town's distinctive older buildings downtown could be a prime target for tragedy in an earthquake, particularly during the day.

For this reason, city Chief Building Inspector Dave Steeves and a City Council-appointed committee are working to identify hazards that eventually will have to be eliminated or reduced by property owners to comply with the city's proposed "seismic-retrofit" ordinance.

The proposed ordinance would call for structural improvements in about 175 older buildings — more than 42 percent of them downtown.

Exempted are single-family homes, apartments of five units or less, and structures built after 1935 that meet Uniform Building Code requirements.

Retrofitting costs will vary depending on the amount of work to be done. Some old buildings already have been retrofitted in the course of remodeling projects.



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But other buildings, like the Alexander Hotel structure at the southwest corner of Locust Street at Pacific Avenue and the wooden-framed St. George Hotel on the Pacific Avenue Mall, will be very costly to retrofit, Steeves said.

Such retrofitting would be so costly for old buildings, such as the St. George Hotel, that razing them would be cheaper, Steeves said.

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— Dave Steeves, building inspector

Quake safety

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As for the Alexander Hotel, one problem is that "someone cut it in half with a chainsaw during the old days," leaving a fairly unstable structure by today's construction standards, Steeves said.

That building — or what's left of it — is now the site of a delicatessen and record store. It's been up for sale, but "whoever buys it will have to do a substantial amount of seismic-retrofit," he said.

Despite his concern, Steeves is not a seismic-safety fascist.

He acknowledges "there are no completely safe buildings, because you can't design them to take into account all the different kinds of motion."

Take Steeves' second-floor office, for instance, in the Planning Department at City Hall. It is a "tilt-up" building of 1970s vintage — concrete slabs are poured on the ground, then tilted up to form the walls.

Recent engineering studies are showing the tilt-ups "aren't that great," as far as stability during quakes, Steeves said.

And, the building inspector jokingly says the safest place to be in an earthquake would probably be in an airplane, looking down on all the destruction.

But, he stressed, some buildings are safer than others and measures can be taken to improve hazardous features.

"The whole idea is not to save the buildings, but to save lives," Steeves said. "My concept is not to redo whole buildings. We're not going to save them anyway. It is to strengthen them; to remove hazards, like balconies and old fire escapes; and to provide an area of refuge for the occupants."

One measure particularly pertinent to downtown is the building of new stairways to second floors. An inside, stable stairway is one of the safest places for occupants to take refuge in case of a quake, Steeves said.

Most of the second stories of downtown buildings today cannot be legally occupied because the buildings don't have such stairways to serve as second exits, Steeves said.

The stairway requirement, therefore, serves a dual purpose: one for safety, the other to allow property owners to lease the second floors.

"It gives them an incentive to meet the requirement," Steeves said. "If you don't provide an incentive, people won't do it."

Another high-priority preventive measure, according to Steeves, is the securing of buildings to their foundations, including homes.

In the Coalinga quake, most of the damaged homes had fallen from their foundations, Steeves said. "Some had stacked bricks (for foundations) that weren't even mortared together. It was terrible."