

## HONORING VETS

# At last, vets return to home away from home

Vets Building reopens  
after long renovation

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SANTA CRUZ — For the first time in nearly three years, veterans on Wednesday filtered back into the building many call a second home.

With an official ribbon-cutting ceremony, the downtown Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Building is reopening after a \$2.6 million structural retrofit. The county is handing the keys over to veterans groups, ending a long odyssey that often had veterans and county officials at loggerheads.

"Feels alright," said Richard Fouse, a Vietnam veteran, happy to be back as he checked out a refurbished basement hangout, one of

SEE VETS ON A4

## VETS

Continued from A1

scores of veterans that filtered into the building. "We would come down for Thanksgiving dinner, different occasions. It was like a community center."

Used as a veterans' services office and a community meeting space, the 1932 historical structure was closed in February 2011 due to seismic concerns, though many vets dispelled — and still do — the county's conclusion that the building was unsafe.

With that saga now over, the process of moving back into the building begins. The interior, including a large amphitheater, studios and offices, looks largely the same. Even unfinished murals were left untouched.

One of those murals is in a small room used for years as a ham radio office. World War II veteran Maurice Ricketts, 91, returned to that room Wednesday, after spending literally every day there in the years leading up to the closure but for one — the day of his wife's funeral.

"This is my hangout," Ricketts said, saying he plans to return the room to its place as an amateur radio hub. "We're going to get it back up."

The county reinforced the roof and foundation and replaced rusted rebar in pilasters that surround



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

The Santa Cruz County Veterans Memorial Building reopened Wednesday.

the building. It added bathrooms, a new boiler and a fire alarm system. And it braced the building against disaster by adding lateral support to the framing.

"We had to strengthen those up to take the load that would come from an earthquake," said Domenic Zigant, project director from Oakland-based Vanir Construction Management.

In the basement, workers essentially excavated the building without removing it, setting up a glorified bucket brigade to dig out a

concrete slab on which half the building rests. That slab was quadrupled in depth, to 16 inches.

"It turned out great. The thing was really, really sketchy. It wasn't far from falling down," said Stew Peterson of Aptos-based Coastwide Environmental, who helped with the initial demolition and abatement work. "They did a great job."

The county also removed lead paint and asbestos, and replaced aging electrical wiring, one of many improvements that will go unnoticed to the naked eye. It also took

up the project in the midst of a government funding crisis.

"It speaks to the importance the county places in preserving and maintaining this structure for the safe use by veterans and the community," Supervisor Neal Coonerty said.

Several local veterans' groups will now begin the process of moving back in. It could be several weeks before the building officially open to the public.

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