

Boards
Supers

The Cucchiara era comes to end

Disaster law reform tops achievements

By STEVE SHENDER
Sentinel staff writer

12-13-88

SANTA CRUZ — If they ever name anything after outgoing Fifth District Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, maybe it will be the new stop light that's planned for the improved Highway 9-Graham Hill Road-Mt. Hermon Road intersection in Felton. Or perhaps it will be a visitor center at the new Quail Hollow Regional Park. Then again, it could be the Santa Cruz Transit District's new "Metro Center" in downtown Santa Cruz, a project which Cucchiara says he "nurtured" as chairman of the Transit District.

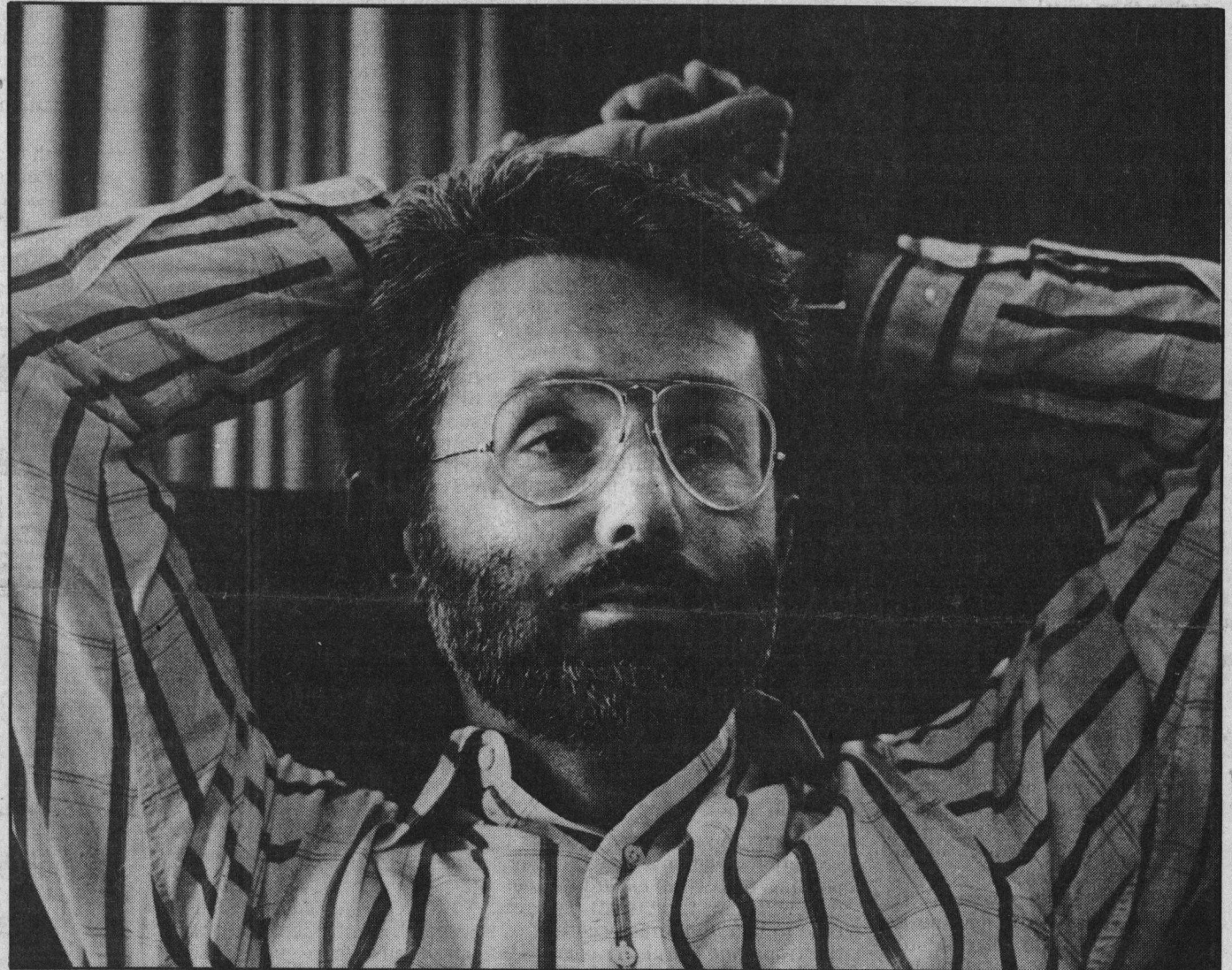
"I like to build things, and that's where my emphasis on public works and capital improvement projects has come from," the 41-year-old Cucchiara said recently. "I like to produce real things that people can touch and feel."

Cucchiara, who is voluntarily relinquishing his board post this month, will be leaving plenty of "real things" behind him. But ironically, his greatest legacy to the people of the mountainous district he has served for the better part of a decade may be something few can "touch and feel" — a potentially far-reaching overhaul of the federal Disaster Relief Act.

After a devastating winter storm swept through the San Lorenzo Valley in 1982 washing out roads, demolishing hillsides and burying homes under rivers of mud, Cucchiara and his constituents were dismayed by the slowness and paucity of federal disaster aid. Cucchiara set out to change the rules. He rallied the support of county officials throughout the state and lobbied relentlessly in Washington for a new law.

Cucchiara says now that one of the best moments of his eight-year tenure on the board came "in the waning hours" of the just-ended 100th Congress, when the House and Senate approved a series of amendments to federal disaster relief law.

"The law now provides for real teeth," Cucchiara said. "This county and every county in the nation ... now have better access to federal resources (when disaster strikes)." The new law provides for at least 75-percent reimbursement in federally declared disasters — before, the minimum was 40



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Longtime Supervisor Joe Cucchiara will attend his last board meeting today.

percent. The law also makes local governments, as well as individuals, eligible for federal disaster assistance, and empowers the Federal Emergency Management Agency to request help and equipment from the military in the wake of disasters.

Congressman Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, confirmed that Cucchiara had "provided a great deal of leadership" on the disaster assistance bill. "He knew what he was talking about," Panetta said, "He had personal experience with the disaster laws and he knew them inside out."

Cucchiara takes special pride in the \$2.6-million improvement project planned for the congested Highway 9-Graham Hill Road intersection in Felton. The supervisor said he spent the better part of his two terms on the board

fighting to restore federal and state funding for the project.

County Public Works Director Don Porath agrees that Cucchiara "was the driving force" behind the project.

"Joe was instrumental in us pushing Caltrans into getting that project going, going, going," Porath said. "Joe has a knack for getting people's attention, and he got people's attention."

Cucchiara appeared to enjoy commanding people's attention as an elected public official. He has never fully explained why he decided last spring to resign from his \$42,000-a-year county supervisor's job, and he is still vague about what he'll do next.

"There's been some expressed interest in my joining an architectural firm again," said Cucchiara, who was a self-employed architectural consultant before he was elected supervisor in 1980.

Cucchiara also said he might become involved with "initiative issues that might be brought to the 1990 or 1992 ballot."

"My ultimate desire would be to try to combine the past eight years with my professional experience ... and try to build something new for the future," he said.

Cucchiara said, however, that it will be tough to find a job as gratifying as county supervisor.

"This is cafeteria-style work," he explained. "There is such a range of demands and problems.

"There is excitement that comes with that diversity and depth that is probably hard to find somewhere else."

It'll also be hard, no doubt, for Cucchiara to find another job with such an exciting erector set.