

# Report praises city's quake response

By MARK BERGSTROM  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The city of Santa Cruz has received high marks from a consultant hired by the city to study its response to the Oct. 17 earthquake.

But Norman Groner cautions local officials not to get overconfident. Luck paid a part in the city's ability to respond, said Groner, a local research psychologist who conducts surveys of emergency responses.

"The damage caused by the earthquake stretched, but did not break the city's resources," he wrote in the report. "Every public safety employee was needed, but they were able to cope with all the immediate life safety needs of the community."

Had the earthquake occurred in the middle of the night or had it touched off large fires throughout the city, the needs might have outstripped the city's resources.

"It helped that there was daylight and that the weather was favorable," he said. Even so, "other communities were slower to appreciate the severity of the same earthquake and respond according-

ly," Groner said.

He credited the city's good response to the talent of its employees and a decentralized style of management.

"City employees are comfortable with receiving difficult assignments and using their initiative and creativity to see them through to completion. Such 'decentralized' management is especially well-suited to coping with volatile organizational environments — and no environment is more volatile than a disaster," he said.

He credited line workers who completed assignments without needing to repeatedly check with their supervisors.

Groner also said that good relations among city department heads paid dividends during the response to the earthquake.

He said the city's good response is useful for future planning "because there is more to be learned from a successful than a failed response." So many things go wrong in a poor response that it's hard to attribute the results to any one cause, he said.

The city developed an emergency-response plan after the 1982

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flood, but that document was so lengthy that implementing the plan would have been difficult, said Fire Chief Ed Ekers. A revised plan which was designed to be functional replaced that earlier plan and that was what was used when the 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck.

"It was put in place immediately and the city staff members all knew their roles," Ekers said.

An emergency command center was established at the eastside fire station to oversee problems throughout the city. A special command post was created for rescue operations on the Pacific Garden Mall.

An earthquake is the most difficult disaster to respond to, Ekers said, because it is so immediate. There are no forecasted conditions. "Other kinds of disasters progress," he explained.

The Oct. 17 earthquake was especially difficult because of the emotional impact of the loss of such a major portion of the city, Ekers said.

"We spoke frequently of the loss to the community. That's an issue you really can't write into an emergency-response plan," he said.

He said city officials hoped the use of fences to block off the mall

not only would serve the purpose of securing the area but also give the appearance of construction rather than destruction.

Another difficult problem for the city was the transition from the emergency-response mode to the recovery mode.

"Going up the scale in intensity is easy, going down is more difficult," Ekers said.

Ekers has been called upon to speak to other cities and governmental agencies about Santa Cruz's response to the earthquake.

City Councilman John Laird agreed with the consultant's view that a decentralized style of government helped during the emergency.

"I think the city responded well and could respond well because many people are given the authority to act on their own. That's what you need in an emergency," Laird said.

"Cities in which authority is concentrated among just a few did not respond so well," he said.

The earthquake did outstrip some departments, Laird said. People had to be switched from one department to another to meet the needs, he said.

The museum director, for example, wound up helping to direct the erection of the fence downtown, Laird said.

Committees of city employees have been established to look into problems that were identified during Groner's interviews. From that standpoint, he said, the survey is not finished.