

# Historic Buildings Downtown mourns its loss

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Damage estimates of the fire that ravaged the downtown Trust Building went as high as \$200,000.

## One blow after another to rebuilding

By GREG BEEBE  
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SANTA CRUZ — The financial cost of the Thursday night blaze that ravaged the historic Trust Building is paltry compared with the fire's emotional toll on downtown rebuilding efforts.

"I'm devastated," said Ceil Cirillo, the redevelopment director hired to engineer the city's efforts to recover from the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

"We had looked forward to that building being one of the anchor historic structures that helped Pacific Avenue retain its character," said Cirillo.

Flames engulfed the third floor of the 80-year-old red brick building around 7 p.m. Thursday, quickly collapsing its roof. Twenty-foot high daggers of fire shot from the landmark's third-floor windows before firefighters quenched the flames around 7:30 p.m.

The fire wasn't declared completely out until 3:15 p.m. Friday. Damage was estimated at \$200,000.



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Two engineers — one from the city and one representing the property owners — will decide Monday if the fire is the knock-out blow to a building that was bloodied but not bowed by the earthquake.

The Trust Building, at the corner of Soquel and Pacific avenues, became a symbol of the post-quake downtown thanks to a teetering brick, loosened in the big temblor, that stubbornly refused to fall from its precarious perch high atop an ornate bay window. The brick finally tum-

bled to the sidewalk last year.

The fire is the latest in a series of setbacks to plague downtown rebuilding. A deal for a multi-screen theater complex — viewed by city leaders as a major downtown drawing card — fell through Feb. 6. Banks have been reluctant to loan money for downtown projects, according to property-owners.

Disasters, too, have dogged downtown's historic buildings. The St. George Hotel burned in October 1990, ending efforts to spare it from the wrecking ball.

The Cooper House, one of the community's best-loved landmarks, was deemed unsafe and razed shortly after the '89 quake.

"We always knew we could suffer short-term setbacks," said City Manager Dick Wilson, "but I certainly didn't anticipate we would have this situation again."

"It's a hard situation," Wilson said. "It's hard for the property owners, it's hard for the people moving ahead (with rebuilding) and it's hard for the (existing businesses) that are trying to

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# Trust Building fire

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hang on," said Wilson.

Cirillo described the event as "one more tragedy that makes the rebuilding (process) that much more painful." She said she hoped that the upcoming downtown streetscape project would boost morale.

Neither Wilson nor City Finance Director Jack Ness could estimate what the latest downtown disaster would do to the city's tax coffers.

The building's property-tax values were already severely devalued because of the earthquake, said Ness. Sales-tax proceeds from the building's tenants were steady but not especially significant even before the quake, he said. The Trust and its companion Elks Building were formerly home to a bank, clothing stores, record shop, cookie bakery, pizza parlor and various offices.

"The greatest loss is the historical loss," said Wilson. "It was a magnificent building and one of the key places in the downtown, and we had from the beginning done everything in our power to save it."

The property owners had worked hard to salvage the historic structure even though it would have been cheaper and faster to knock it down and build anew, Wilson said.

Shepard Kett, a member of the family that owns the Trust Building, said a commitment had "absolutely" been made to press ahead with rehabilitation.

"It didn't completely make

sense money-wise, but we wanted to save it. ... It's such a beautiful building."

Ruben Fuentes, property manager for the Kett family, met earlier Thursday with city officials to plot a schedule for rehabilitating the landmark.

Pat Calvert, executive director of the Downtown Association, said Fuentes spent more than an hour with her later that same day; the mood was decidedly upbeat, she said. They discussed possible tenants for the revived building, floor plans and the effort by Ness to secure federal disaster-relief financing to pay for the tricky demolition of the adjacent Elks building, also owned by the Ketts. That building would have to be torn down carefully, without damaging the common wall of Ferrari Florists next door.

"The irony is, the building that burned is the building they wanted to save. It was the (Elks) building next store that was going to come down," said Calvert.

Joyce Melrose, owner of a nearby Pacific Avenue parcel, hoped at least the Trust Building's 19th Century facade could be saved. "It's one of the last historical cornerstones in town," she said. "I hope it can be saved."

Firefighters, meanwhile, said water pressure problems from one Pacific Avenue fire hydrant had no bearing on the outcome of the blaze.

Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ed Ekers said some hydrants have been periodically out of service during recent underground construction work, but "the whole water sys-

tem was up and running and serviced all our needs" Thursday night.

The weak hydrant, he said, "was not part of the initial attack team. It was positioned more to protect other buildings in case the fire had moved."

Cause of the fire has not been determined.

"If and when the building is found to be sound, further investigative steps will be taken," said Ekers. "Due to present conditions, the investigation team is still unable to determine the cause of the fire. ...

"There's all types of speculation that can be made — from a candle (left by a transient) to a work crew that might have left something ... or an amateur trying to cause property damage," said Ekers. "But it would not be appropriate to make an official statement until we can get in there and investigate fully."

Santa Cruz Police officers patrol vacant downtown buildings almost daily, said Sgt. Howard Sanderson, and often find signs that transients are using the buildings for shelter.

Calvert said "there are no reasons to have any suspicions" about motivations for intentional arson.

"There was no fire insurance on the building," she said. Kett wasn't sure if his family had insurance against fire. Underwriters, he said, are reluctant to insure vacant, quake-damaged structures downtown.

"A building like that is hard to get fire insurance on," Kett said.