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## AS WE SEE IT



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

The magnitude of the Loma Prieta earthquake registers on the faces of Pacific Garden Mall visitors minutes after the 1989 temblor.

# 20 years of change

## *Earthquake was a defining event for Santa Cruz County*

**T**wenty years and counting.

The Loma Prieta earthquake remains, after two decades, a defining event in the history of our community.

With Saturday's anniversary of the Oct. 17, 1989 quake — commemorated in a special Sentinel publication you'll find with your Saturday newspaper and online — we expect to hear again the refrain, "Before the earthquake," as a description of what life and business and architecture once was like in our community. Was it an idyllic era where tolerance reigned, history mingled with the onrush of innovation and the outside world stayed mostly ... outside?

"After the earthquake" often stands for — things changed, and not all for the good.

What is somewhat dismissed over the years is that many of the changes were beneficial. For instance, downtown Santa Cruz was mostly rebuilt after the destruction that happened because of the quake. While some old-timers miss the old "Pacific Garden Mall," with its numerous trees and active social scene, today's downtown is, by and large, more successful and inviting to shoppers and strollers.

Yes, some of the same problems remain — complaints about panhandlers and drug and alcohol abuse — but today's downtown stands as a testimony to the efforts of a community-wide coalition to create public and private spaces that are attractive and built to last.

Santa Cruz County also learned about resilience. The earthquake ended a decade that had also featured a devastating and deadly flood. Both times, people responded — by helping others, pitching in to clean up, supporting local businesses.

While people loved the old and historic buildings that collapsed in the quake, many were unsafe. Today's new or retrofitted structures are built to withstand major earthquakes — a necessity in our geologically unstable area.

In South County, Watsonville's main business district was struggling before the earthquake, and in many ways, struggles still. But the city has subsequently seen a major shopping center locate outside the downtown district. Then, Watsonville's civic center, including a courthouse, opened downtown in 2008, built with federal money along with state and local funds.

So much happened after the quake — from the wrecking balls along Pacific Avenue to the merchant and service tents to political changes in Watsonville. The housing market would soar, then retreat. Silicon Valley would advance from over the hill and IUC Santa

the wrecking balls along Pacific Avenue to the merchant and service tents to political changes in Watsonville. The housing market would soar, then retreat. Silicon Valley would advance from over the hill and UC Santa Cruz would take its place as a major research university in the region. Who could have known the changes that would come after that day now receding into memory?

Are we ready for another cataclysmic event? Perhaps not, at least psychologically. But a convincing argument can be made that Santa Cruz County in 2009 is a safer, more economically diverse community — and more conscious of our interdependence — than we were Oct. 17, 1989.

This community came together after it nearly came apart.

That is something to celebrate.