

10/29/89 Cooper House

Mall walls tumble down

By TOM LONG
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SANTA CRUZ — As wreckers tore down the last remnants of the Cooper House Saturday afternoon, teams of volunteers went into other buildings slated for demolition to rescue belongings.

Developer Jay Paul, owner of the Cooper House, stood amidst a tangle of steel beams and mountains of brick and rubble, watching as bulldozers finished the job a wrecking ball had started Thursday.

"It was not a happy decision to do this," Paul said. "But even though it looked good from the outside, the major shear walls were gone inside. Someone could have gotten killed trying to fix this thing."

Paul said he had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on structural improvements to the building in the past year, improvements designed to help the walls withstand an earthquake like the 7.1 temblor that hit northern California on Oct. 17.

"If we hadn't just tied the whole building together we probably would have had a lot of people killed," Paul said. "The economic loss was really bad, but no one got killed and I'm really grateful about that."

According to Larry Pearson, a city Planning Department worker who's working as information officer for the city during the disaster cleanup, 15 more buildings — most on the opposite side of Pacific Avenue from the Cooper House — have already been slated for demolition. And there are some buildings — most notably the County Bank and Trust Building across from the Cooper House site — that many think will have to be added to that list.

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Demolition workers struggle to salvage Cooper House cornerstone Saturday.

Mall/ Cooper House owner plans to rebuild

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As Paul watched the Cooper House come down, tenants of some business office buildings were allowed to enter the fenced off Pacific Garden Mall and retrieve possessions. Volunteers helped tenants of the Hihn Building on the corner of Lincoln Street and Pacific Avenue carry files, records and books out of the building and load them into cars.

Jeffrey Armstrong, who calls himself Saint Silicon and was arrested for trying to get into his office at the Hihn Building earlier in the week, tossed garbage bags filled with possessions out a second-story window. Later in the day, a line of workers passed along the contents of the Hallmark Stationary store and piled boxes in a waiting U-Haul Van.

Bob Rittenhouse of Rittenhouse Insurance led a crew that emptied his building on the corner of Pacific Avenue and Church Street.

"We got most of our stuff out, enough so that we can operate," Rittenhouse said. Rittenhouse said his business has moved to 575 Soquel Avenue.

"It really helps us to get our files for our clients," Rittenhouse said. "We're operating out of cardboard boxes and on card tables now, but at least we're operating."

Rittenhouse said his building "is between being yellow-tagged and red-tagged; they don't know if they're going to knock it down or not."

The Hihn Building was slated to come down as soon as the tenants who could safely reach their possessions were done with their salvage effort. Each tenant was being given about 15 minutes to pull out what they could.

Meanwhile, the wrecking ball derrick that had destroyed the top half of the Cooper House was being moved slowly down Pacific Avenue toward the Hihn Building, its next target. And Paul stood across from the rubble-strewn lot that once held the Cooper House, holding two miraculously unbroken bottles of wine that were all that were salvaged from the Crepe Place Restaurant, which opened in the Cooper House last Spring.

"All we've got now is a lot," Paul said. "A pretty expensive lot."

Paul said he would be talking to city planners Monday about rebuilding. He said he hopes to start construction on whatever will take the place of the Cooper House by Spring.

"I hope to start as soon as possible," Paul said. "It's going to die down here unless we move pretty quickly."