

Owner glad for tougher requirements

Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — Peter Birns was an unhappy man Oct. 16. But by 5:05 p.m. Oct. 17, he was singing a different tune.

Birns is one of the lucky ones. His just-renovated Sporting Life store on the 500 block of Main Street is one of only a handful of downtown buildings that survived the earthquake intact.

The building, which used to house the Pajaro Valley Bakery, was built sometime in the 1920s by architect William Weeks and was a combination of unreinforced masonry and reinforced concrete block, Birns said.

It survived the quake because of the exhaustive number of structural improvements the city's chief building inspector, Neil England, had required.

"For two years I was bitching," Birns said. "But after all this, I admit they were right and I was wrong."

Birns lobbied heavily to sidestep the structural improvements required after he submitted plans to convert the building to a retail store. He spent twice what he had expected to spend on the project. He won't say how much money was spent, but city records indicate the improvements cost more than \$1 million.

"The first thing we had to do was hire a structural engineer," Birns said. "This alone was expensive. Then we had to do what the engineer wanted. I was at my wit's end."

The engineer called for 45,000 staples in the roof to hold it in place, steel straps tying the walls to the roof, and five 15-foot steel braces to bolster the roof, among other improvements.

"The Birns building was subject to collapse before he started construction," England said. "The roof was ready to collapse and it had a lot of other problems. They have a building now that potentially has a very long life."

The building was virtually gutted and rebuilt from the inside out. The top of the unreinforced masonry facade remained, but was strapped to the walls and roof by complicated supports.

The project was delayed several months as Birns and the city went over the plans, but by Oct. 17, it was virtually complete.

Then the earthquake hit. And while most of downtown suffered irreparable damage, Birns' new store came through without a scratch.

"I'm the first one to say they were right. They made me do as much as the structural engineer called for, and it worked," Birns said. "I never thought I'd be saying this."

— Jamie Marks