

Hospital may be torn down



Watsonville Community Hospital's ground floor had to be torn up to repair the sewer lines.

Kurt Ellison

Officials weigh costs of repair, rebuilding

By CHELA ZABIN
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Watsonville Community Hospital officials may decide that it makes more sense to tear down and completely rebuild the hospital rather than to continue with its costly earthquake-related repairs.

Barbara Shingai, one of the hospital's vice presidents, said this morning that building a new hospital is one of the options Watsonville Community is considering. Although the 21-year-old hospital has been inspected and deemed safe several times, its sewage system and first floor suffered serious damage in the Oct. 17 earthquake.

Initially, the hospital had estimated repairs at \$2 million, but as further damage was discovered, increased the estimates to \$10 million. Now, it's possible the costs will go even higher, Shingai said.

Shingai said a comprehensive damage assessment is being done, which, when completed next month, will give the hospital a better idea of where it stands. Shingai said that FEMA and the state Office of Emergency Services have said that if the cost of repairs exceeds 50 percent of the cost of replacing the damaged portions, building a new hospital could be considered. Because FEMA is paying for much of the repair work, the hospital has to operate under FEMA guidelines.

But that doesn't mean the hospital will automatically be torn down and rebuilt, Shingai said. Other factors will need to be taken into consideration and the hospital will have to determine if rebuilding "is in our best interest," she said.

Shingai said the hospital has not decided on what type of building

would replace the hospital should it be rebuilt.

Part of the reason repairs became so costly is that the damaged sewer system was under the hospital. Workers had to tear up the floor to make the repairs then reroute the system so it could be reached more easily in the future. Shingai said the rerouting had been completed.

In addition to considering rebuilding, the hospital has considered making repairs in phases, moving hospital functions to different parts of the building so operations can continue. The hospital intends to remain operational during the repair process, Shingai said.

Rebuilding is being more seriously considered now because of the indication that costs might be higher than expected, she said.

During the quake, the hospital moved both horizontally and vertically, Shingai said. In addition to the sewer system, portions of the hospital floor sank, equipment was thrown around, a modular unit sank several feet into the ground, metal framing buckled and a glass hallway leading from the main building to the Eiskamp building shattered. The hospital's ventilation system was also damaged.

The sewer system damage wasn't noticed until the hospital started to smell bad and gnats appeared in the building in January.

Shingai said the hospital has made \$667,000 worth of repairs so far and has been reimbursed \$229,000 from FEMA. It has submitted \$1.2 million in reimbursement requests to FEMA so far.