

Santa Cruz is still the 'center'

By GREG BEEBE
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SANTA CRUZ — The jazz-combo sounds of Warmth waft through the balmy October air as the first anniversary of the Loma Prieta earthquake approaches. A husband helps his wife load packages into the back of their car. Outdoor diners chat between chopstick-bites of Chinese food. A man silently works a crossword puzzle. And in the distance, a street musician wails.

These sights, rather typical visions of a downtown Santa Cruz street scene pre-earthquake 1989, are now faint, flickering signs that the focal point of Santa Cruz County is still alive, staggered by disaster but not down for the count.

Most community leaders, politicians and business people are staunch in their belief that although the Oct. 17 earthquake may have put a serious crimp in Santa Cruz life — not to mention leveling 34 commercial buildings — the downtown will remain the cornerstone of county existence.

"Santa Cruz is historically the county seat, historically the most vital commercial center, the center of culture and I think it still is," said county Supervisor Gary Patton, whose district surrounds the

OCT 17
One year later
NOV 1, 17

EARTHQUAKE

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city.

"But there is no doubt that right now it is not as fertile an economic-ecological entity. But the incredible vitality of downtown is there. There are those places that have been able to find a physical foothold — that to be me shows the vitality and the commitment to downtown is still there," Patton said.

"Not that Santa Cruz is better than Capitola, but it continues to be at the center of our life."

In the aftermath of the earthquake, 120 businesses vanished from the downtown area, according to Chamber of Commerce fig-

ures. Some relocated to the mid-county area. Doomsayers predicted it was just the beginning of a mass exodus of commerce to Capitola, Aptos and Scotts Valley.

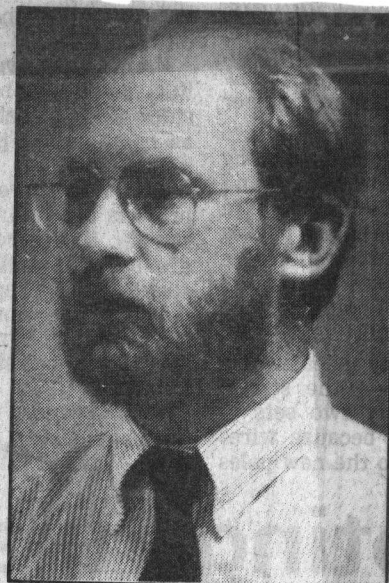
"Obviously, after the earthquake people are going to go where there are buildings," said Santa Cruz City Councilman John Laird.

"But I'm really confident that the city is going to remain the central area for this region, and you can still tell it by the restaurants, the movie theaters, the cultural events. And when the downtown's back, you'll know that you're in a city with character and feeling, not in a place that can be in Sandusky, Ohio," Laird said.

"I think downtown Santa Cruz remains the focal point and that why there's so much commitment to rebuilding. I don't think that void's going to be filled with something else," said city manager Dick Wilson.

John Livingston, owner of Logo's Books and Records, said that although he sees a current shift of commerce toward Capitola "because of the quake, three years down the road from now, when things are rebuilt, I see a shift back."

Stephanie Harlan, the mayor of Capitola, said her city is not out to



John Laird
City has 'character and feeling'

capitalize on the misfortunes of Santa Cruz.

"Each community has its own identity and its own special things it offers," she said. "They're all quite different. We've had more new development in the mid-county in recent years that has made a difference. But business is still very viable in Santa Cruz, in the San Lorenzo Valley and the Pajaro Valley," Harlan said.

"I don't see it as a major shift. I

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see a balance in the whole county between what is going on economically and culturally and socially," she said.

Although the city of Capitola's sales-tax revenues increased significantly in 1990, City Manager Steve Burrell said "it's more of an indication of expansion of the (Capitola Mall) and probably some additional business being done there. I attribute most of it to the addition of 300,000 square feet of commercial space."

Charles Eadie, a Santa Cruz city planner, said "as the county urbanizes overall you will get a greater diversity of focal point. Each part of the county will have a particular aspect to it."

"Santa Cruz is always going to be a major focal point — in county government, as a business district, as a cultural arts and entertainment center — but at the same time the population can't all live in the city of Santa Cruz," Eadie said.

Burrell said, "If you want certain kinds of things you buy them in Capitola. If you want other kinds of things you buy them in Santa Cruz. The people that are out there buying things shop all around, and I don't think they're very cognizant of boundaries. Most retail activities are very close to where you live."

Bob Bettinger is consulting Santa Cruz businesses with grant funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce. He lives in Capitola, but doesn't shop there. Yet Bettinger is of the opinion that the commercial focal point of the county was "shifting before, and the earthquake just reinforced it."

"It is required for downtown

Santa Cruz to work real hard to rebuild. We'll have to do something very, very inviting to get people back."

Santa Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt believes "that Capitola Mall always filled a different function than downtown Santa Cruz."

"I don't think that downtown Santa Cruz was any longer the regional shopping center for the county. It just wasn't. But it certainly was the cultural center, it certainly was the entertainment center and it certainly was a strong specialty retail market and one that I think could have been stronger and will be stronger in the future," Wormhoudt said.

William Rubel, a Santa Cruz businessman and a member of the Vision Santa Cruz quake recovery advisory committee, said "the focal point of the county will never shift away from downtown."

"Throughout the country the focal point is shifting back to the downtowns. We're going to be rebuilding a better downtown than we ever had," Rubel said.

"The focal point is much more diffuse than it used to be," said county Supervisor Fred Keeley. "I don't think there's a single focal point anymore."

In the tumultuous days following the earthquake, luggage-store owner Susan Groff led the effort to find temporary retail space for 45 displaced downtown merchants. The Phoenix Pavilions, erected on city parking lots, helped many merchants stay in business for the crucial Christmas season, averting further disaster.

Groff, though, recently opened another luggage store in Rancho Del Mar shopping center in Aptos. Although she has kept her original

Santa Cruz shop open in one of the pavilions, Groff isn't sure how much longer she'll stay in Santa Cruz.

"I've hung on as long as I could," said Groff. "It breaks my heart that we're losing a viable, traditional shopping area that could be quite good. But the thing is, you have to adapt. You have to change your buying habits and direction."

"I'm very pleased with my Aptos location. It is just superb, very clean. The customers that come here, they recognize brands, they recognize that you have to pay a price if you want quality."

"I loved the mall. We were doing very well down there. But some of my customers used to call and say 'Do you have a back door?' ...I'm paying more rent in the tent than I was paying two doors down from the Cooper House," Groff said.

"Sure, some people went and opened retail stores in other places because they had to and I don't think you can fault them for that," Wormhoudt said. "And some of those people would like to come back if they can. People shouldn't go under, after all, and I'm glad that hasn't happened."

Downtown jeweler Stephan Sternat said some of those businesses that haven't left the city are "struggling to stay alive" downtown. Others are constantly wooed by outside landlord-suitors, he said. "I get letters every day that say 'Hey, why don't you move here?' Yet Sternat remains downtown, and harbors some resentment toward those businesses that have fled."

"Only little geeks bail; I heard a surfer say that once," said Sternat.