

Earthquake - Watsonville

Big downtown buildings falling to wrecking ball

City hustles to beat FEMA deadline

By LANE WALLACE
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Demolition has begun or will begin today on nearly all of the downtown Watsonville buildings scheduled to come down, just in time for the deadline for guaranteed state and federal funding of the work.

The deadline for starting those demolitions is today, a month after the Oct. 17 earthquake that destroyed many of the older stores and offices in downtown Watsonville, although city officials are trying to get an extension of the deadline.

Wreckers began taking down Ford's Department Store, the biggest building in downtown, late yesterday morning. Other buildings scheduled for demolition include the Odd Fellows building, the Masonic hall, Watsonville Jeans, and the E.B. Lettunich block, next to Ford's on the west side of Main Street. (The four-story Lettunich building, across the street from Ford's, is not scheduled to come down.)

John Cooper, the city's public works director, said he hopes to get work started today on all the buildings scheduled for demolition.

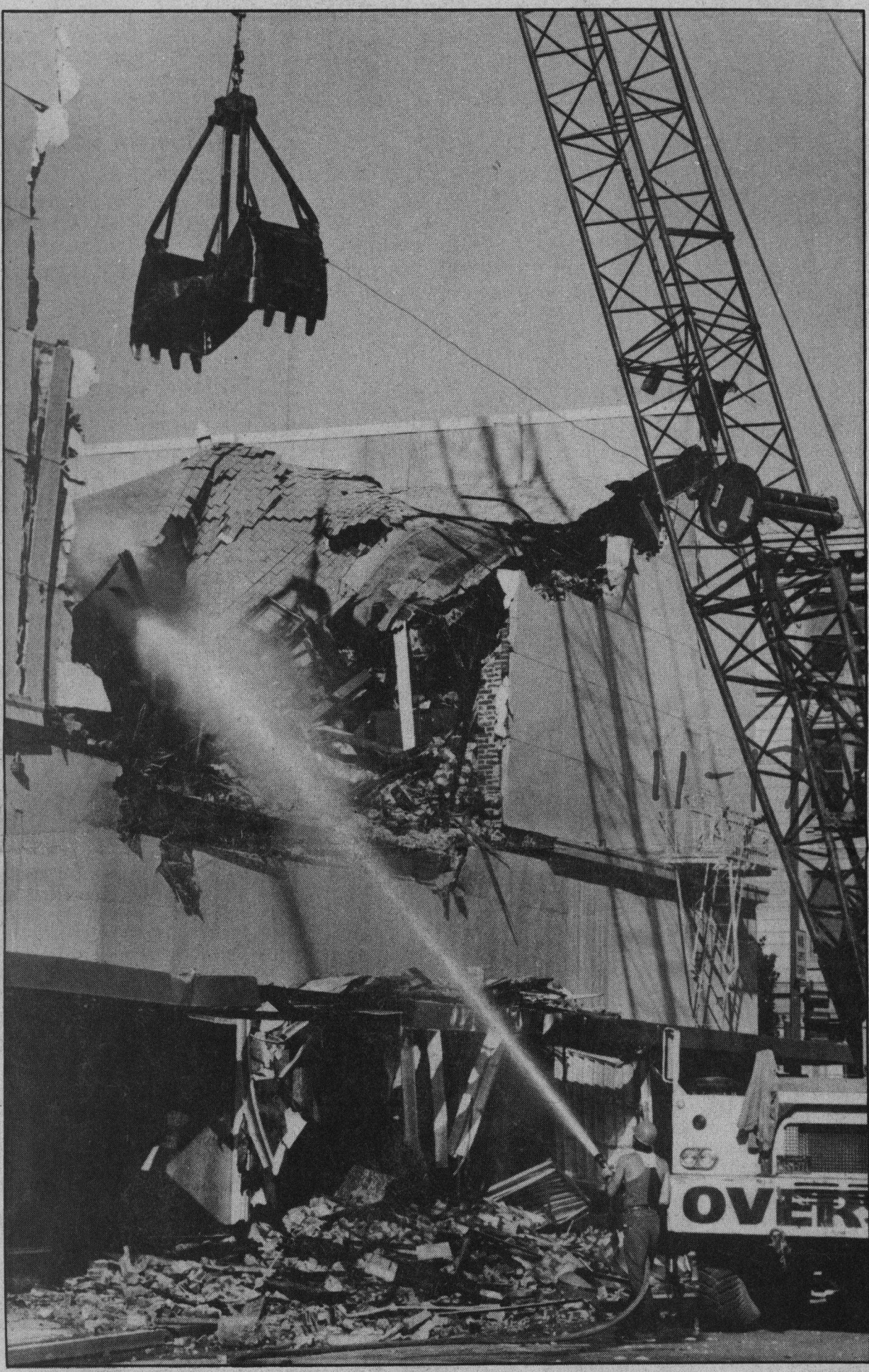
The City Council was told yesterday afternoon that the chances for an extension of the deadline for guaranteed funding don't look good. Without the extension, it's possible businesses could get 100 percent funding of demolition, but it would require more red tape.

When an earthquake destroyed much of Whittier's central business district two years ago, the Federal Emergency Management Agency extended the deadline to 90 days.

FEMA pays for 75 percent of the demolition, and the state picks up the remainder. The funding is only available in places where a collapsed building would present a public safety problem; it's not available for taking down private homes.

But there's a new state law, passed Nov. 4, which sets the deadline at 30 days after the earthquake. Radin said his staff is being told that FEMA can't extend the deadline because of the state law.

Getting definite answers is next to impossible, Radin said. "We have nothing written" from the state or federal governments. Radin said he's waiting for a call from Congressman Leon Panetta's office on the matter. As of this morning, Panetta's office said no decision had been made.



Kurt Ellison

Crane takes big gouge out of Ford's as demolition starts.

Santa Cruz County has also requested an extension of the 30-day deadline, the council was told.

After the 30-day deadline, if the extension is not approved, an application for demolition funding must be approved by FEMA, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the State Historic Preservation Officer. Before

the deadline, only FEMA approval is needed.

There are two major downtown buildings where demolition is still in question: the Jepsen Building, in the 500 block of Main Street, and the Chamber of Commerce, at 444 Main.

Ethlyn Miller, who owns the Jepsen building with her husband, Ken, criticized the city for not

acting sooner on the request to extend the deadline until Tuesday.

"I'm really concerned that (the city) waited," she said.

Mayor Betty Murphy said the city didn't realize it would take more than 30 days to get all the demolition started.

COUNCIL

► From page 1

"It's impossible" to make a quick decision, Miller responded, because "you can't get structural engineers to give you any solid figures" on rebuilding costs in time to meet the deadline.

The city of Santa Cruz moved quickly in demolishing the Pacific Garden Mall, Murphy said, but "we tried to work with the property owners rather than set a deadline."

Charlene Shaffer, executive director of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, arrived at City Hall after the meeting and said the chamber board will meet Monday to decide the chamber building's fate. She said the chamber has also had trouble getting a definitive estimate on repair costs.

The Chamber of Commerce is working on a plan for promotion of local businesses, Shaffer said. It will be presented to the Central Business Improvement District Monday at 8 a.m. at the chamber's office at 801 Freedom Blvd.



The council yesterday also approved advancing \$175,000 in city funds for installation of water and sewer services at the 44-unit temporary mobile-home park on Madison Street for those left homeless by the earthquake.