

Watsonville owners try to stop demolition

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WATSONVILLE — Demolition hearings begin today for property owners of heavily damaged downtown buildings who want to save their structures despite city pressure to raze them.

Although demolition has begun on two downtown buildings, City Manager John Radin said at least six property owners want to preserve their earthquake-damaged buildings and have asked for a hearing.

Some 32 buildings in downtown were badly damaged by the Oct. 17 earthquake and the aftershocks, including many of the city's landmarks.

The fate of the gabled St. Patrick's church is still unknown, although the steeple and its four spires have been removed. The Odd Fellows building and Masonic Temple also were nearly destroyed by the quake.

The hearings are to give property owners a chance to present a plan to repair their buildings, according to Radin.

"We're telling the people our structural engineers said their building is demolished. They have to come up with a plan to fix them, or we'll tear them down," Radin said.

Two buildings that have already begun to fall to the wrecking ball are the Hildreth Building, between the Fox Theatre and Wells Fargo

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— John Radin, city manager

Bank, and La Canada Shoe store, on the 300 block of Main Street.

The 100,000-square-foot Ford's department store will be torn down, but Radin said the demolition date is unknown. The city is giving the owners time to move their stock to new locations.

Ford's recently opened new stores at the Crossroads shopping center and Westridge Industrial Park.

Radin is eager to begin the demolition, although many property owners have warned it will be years before the downtown is rebuilt.

"If we wait too long FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) won't pay for the demolition. They pick up practically 100 percent of the cost now," Radin said. "And demolition isn't cheap. It's in the six digits for some of these buildings.

"We're really trying to reopen the downtown and get people back down there," he said, noting that for the first time since the quake, West Beach Street is open.

Even if the downtown is reconstructed, rents on some of the older buildings run 50 cents to 75

cents a square foot, which is considerably less than what it would be for a new building, said William Delvac, a Los Angeles attorney specializing in historic buildings.

The buildings that will be reviewed at the hearings include:

- Masonic Temple, Maple Street. "I've got a release to begin demolition in my hands, but I got a call last night that they're looking at finding someone to buy it and save it," Radin said.

- Odd Fellows building, East Beach Street. The owners originally said they would tear the partially collapsed brick building down, but Radin said they've requested a hearing.

- Lettunich Building, 400 Main St. The majority of the building is sound, but there are questions about the structural integrity of a common wall with the Skills Center, which is next to the Odd Fellows building, Radin said.

- Stoesser Building, 300 Main St. Owner Stew Kett has asked for a hearing to save the building, which houses several small stores and Jalisco Restaurant.

- E.B. Lettunich Building. This is the smaller of the two Lettunich buildings, located on the 400 block of Main Street. Radin said the owners have called in another structural engineer to see if it can be saved.

- Johnson Drugs. This building and the neighboring Jefsen Hotel, owned by Ken Miller, are being reviewed by a second structural engineer to see if there is a way to save them.

Stella Romo, owner of two buildings on the 300 block, has agreed to begin demolition on her buildings, but is trying to save Ace Hardware. Romo leases the space from Stew Kett for her Jalisco Restaurant, which Kett is attempting to save.

Radin said another building that was listed as "destroyed" by the earthquake may be salvageable. That's the Don Fisher Motors building, 637 Main St. One wall is crumbling, but the rest is repairable.

"Anyone can repair their building. It's just a matter of cost," said Radin.