

Growth **Development was the issue**

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Some Midcounty disputes were settled in 1989

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

Residents in mid-Santa Cruz County had the dubious distinction of being next door to the center, or epicenter, of the event that overshadowed all other news in 1989 — the Oct. 17 earthquake. Geologists located its epicenter in the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, in the hills above Aptos Village.

Far from being shunned, however, the communities set in the wooded hills and coastal cliffs are likely to spend 1990 much as they did this year: wrangling about how to keep too many people from moving there.

In 1989, county supervisors settled some disputes that had gone on for as long as two decades, and forged ahead with plans on how to use some other fought-over properties.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Robley Levy, who represents the Midcounty area, said prolonged public debates over specific properties are unusually heated in Midcounty because residents treasure the area's natural beauty.

"We do not want to see it become another San Jose," she said. "That's been at the heart of all the growth issues — how can we maintain the quality of life, the clean air and open space, in the face of change?"

Levy said the coming year probably would bring more of the same, with familiar pressures to control urban sprawl and build affordable housing. She foresees a new pressure to control building in mountainous areas, where the earthquake may have loosened large slabs of land.

As the communities grow, they may increasingly try incorporating and annexing as ways of controlling growth or sales-tax revenue.

Early in 1989, proponents of incorporating Aptos as a city received guidelines from the Local Agency Formation Commission for

a feasibility study on how the new city would pay its bills.

After several delays, including a public hearing on the study's scope and revisions of the study based on a lower estimation of growth, the study is complete and is in LAFCO's hands. LAFCO will decide next year whether or not to require an environmental impact

This year the board of supervisors approved a master plan for the use of the Polo Grounds in Aptos, a piece of property near Highway 1, which had already been the focus of many battles when the county bought it two years ago.

The new Polo Grounds plan calls for athletic playing fields and

with public access trails built to the beach.

The original benchlands proposals had been for 450 units, and the property's zoning allows for 750. But Levy voted against the project in the end, saying it should have been scaled back even more. The company has since passed the project to another developer.

Another Seascope Land Co. project, known as the uplands project, is running into permit problems because the rare Santa Cruz long-toed salamander dwells in the area.

In Soquel, supervisors agreed this year to buy the O'Neill Ranch for \$6 million, ending years of vocal opposition to development projects there. A committee was appointed to make suggestions about uses for the land, which may include affordable housing units.

The Midcounty area was not without gung-ho development this year. The Capitola Mall spent the year quietly completing a two-year expansion project, which more than doubled its tenants, from 40 to 100.

The indoor mall sailed through the earthquake, increasing anxiety at both ends of the county that it would draw shoppers away from the surviving stores and tent shopping centers in downtown Watsonville and Santa Cruz, and contribute to congestion on Highway 1.

Shoppers, however, seemed pleased with the expansion. The holiday season was, by all accounts, "bustling" at the mall.

Julia Walker, the mall's manager, said a few days before Christmas that it was clear the mall's shops were having "a very busy, successful season."

It was not yet clear what the mall's effect on other commercial centers in the county has been, although many merchants reported that they had experienced slight increases in sales over last year's holiday season.

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— Supervisor Robley Levy

report, and whether to put the issue before the voters.

An informal poll conducted by the Register-Pajaronian in July found that residents of the Aptos area are divided on incorporation, but their disagreement is over how, not whether, growth should be controlled.

Those who support incorporation believe it would give them tighter reins on growth and better services; those who oppose it believe it would encourage growth, because the new city would have to boost its tax base to pay for services.

Meanwhile, the fate of the Porter Sesnon property near Aptos, site of one of the most hard-fought land disputes in the county's recent history, still hangs in the balance. In 1988 voters countywide turned down Wingspread, the planned development of condominiums and a performing arts complex there, and the state began negotiating with the developers to buy it for use as a park.

Bargaining between the state and the developer, however, bogged down this year over the price tag.

a community center, with two-thirds of it remaining open space. Many neighbors had opposed the plan, partly because the playing fields would draw more traffic to the area. Others wanted more of it left in its natural state.

Supervisors also settled a festering dispute this year with the Seascope Land Company over the proposed 101-unit golf lodge for the Aptos Seascope Golf Course.

The company gained approval for the project in the late 1960s. When the board shifted politically later and tried to halt the project, the company sued successfully. Even so, this year Levy was able to win support on the board to withhold an automatic continuation of the permit to build, effectively killing the project.

The Seascope Land Co.'s benchlands project fared better, winning the supervisors' approval this summer after its density had been scaled down in more than two years of negotiations. Final plans call for a 280-unit resort hotel on the coastal bluffs between Rio del Mar and La Selva Beach,