

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Santa Cruz Knew It Was Risking Quake Deaths

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one faced by all cities that must weigh earthquake safety against economic growth and preservation of historic buildings. To many businessmen and politicians, the fear of driving merchants away to nearby suburban malls seems more menacing than the possibility of a major quake.

Throughout California, more than 300 cities have unreinforced masonry buildings similar to those that fell on the Pacific Garden Mall, but only 35 have begun programs to strengthen them, according to the state Seismic Safety Commission.

San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley are among those that do not have such safety programs.

## Defenseless Against Quake

In Santa Cruz, according to dozens of interviews and records examined since last month's disaster, the very policies designed to ensure the mall's place as a pillar of the local economy left the city's downtown virtually defenseless against the 7.1-magnitude quake.

As a result, the devastation was immense. At least a third of the mall's 75 commercial buildings were damaged beyond repair; almost 2,000 people were put out of work; low-income housing was lost; and more than 200 businesses were displaced. It may take several years and cost \$150 million to rebuild.

The eclectic, six-block-long mall was a symbol of the city itself, reflecting Santa Cruz's evolution from an isolated fishing community into a cosmopolitan college town and New Age bazaar.

When the University of California opened its Santa Cruz campus nearly 25 years ago, the city's conservative political landscape was revolutionized, turning a small town into a mecca for the emerging counterculture movement of the 1960s.

Throughout the changes, the tree-shaded mall reflected Santa Cruz's varied population, which included everyone from yuppies and fourth-generation Italian fisherman to long-haired seekers of spiritual bliss in the mountains.

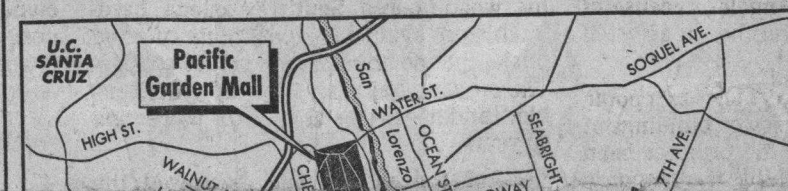
At the same time, the preservation of the mall was viewed as an



BY BRANT WARD/THE CHRONICLE

With seismic reinforcing, the Pacific Garden Mall in Santa Cruz might have withstood the quake that devastated it

## DEMOLISHED MALL BUILDINGS



## THE THREE WHO DIED



ed not to pass an earthquake safety law two years ago, the city staff was racing to meet a state-imposed deadline for identifying hazardous buildings. When the quake hit, City Planning Director Peter Kaztlberger was about to report his recommendations to the City Council.

"Unreinforced masonry buildings are susceptible to catastrophic



their town's fragile economy, which relies heavily on the outside dollars of tourists, college students and Silicon Valley commuters. The mall generated more than \$100 million in retail sales, one-fifth of the city's total sales volume.

"It was a real destination for people, the heart of the city — and now it's gone," said Bob Shepherd, the city's finance director.

Critics say economic and other priorities blinded city and county officials who should have been equally concerned with earthquake safety.

### More Could Have Died

"We are really lucky only three people died," said Mary Camera, the owner of the Lilly Marlene Restaurant, which was destroyed in the quake. "If it had been earlier in the day, like lunchtime, many more people would have been killed."

The potential for injury and destruction in Santa Cruz was enormous. The land most likely to fail in an earthquake lay beneath the center of the business district, the most concentrated part of town. The mall was lined with unreinforced masonry buildings dating from 1900 and earlier.

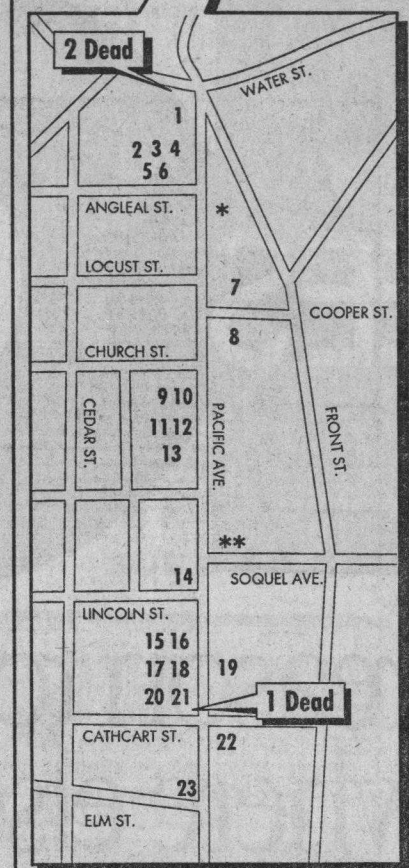
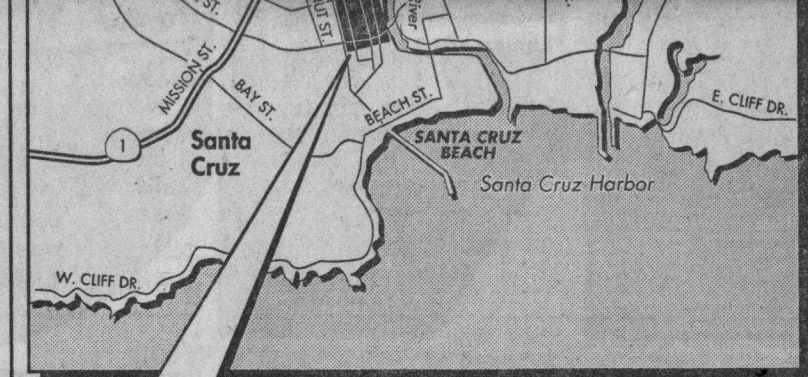
"Being in a floodplain certainly contributed to the added damage," said Lloyd Cluff, chairman of the state Seismic Safety Commission, who examined the mall after the quake. "But the lack of earthquake resistance in those buildings was probably the biggest factor. The buildings could have been improved, and they weren't. Had they done what some other cities had done, they wouldn't have experienced that kind of damage."

The earthquake hazards in Santa Cruz had been discussed repeatedly by elected officials and city planners since at least the early 1970s. As city planner Joe Hall said, "What happened downtown wasn't really unexpected."

Santa Cruz was forced to confront its physical weaknesses when the state ordered all cities and counties to include seismic safety as part of their planning, a directive that resulted from the Sylmar earthquake that struck the San Fernando Valley in 1971.

Since then, several studies conducted by Santa Cruz city and county planners identified the hidden dangers of the Pacific Garden Mall:

■ In 1975, a county study concluded that downtown Santa Cruz was particularly vulnerable to earthquakes because of its location on a soft floodplain of the San Lor-



Source: City of Santa Cruz and business records

- 1 1547 Pacific, Bookshop Santa Cruz
  - 2 1531 Pacific, Modern Life
  - 3 1529 Pacific, The Gold Camel
  - 4 1527 Pacific, Zwerling Optometrist, Raven Lang Acupuncture
  - 5 1523 Pacific, Santa Cruz Hardware
  - 6 1521 Pacific, Chi Pants, Family Service Association
  - 7 107 Cooper, Shandrydan and Offices, Santa Cruz County Historical Trust
  - 8 110 Cooper, Historic Cooper House
  - 9 1379 Pacific, Body Options
  - 10 1373 Pacific, Angelica's
  - 11 1363 Pacific, Lilly Marlene Restaurant, 1359 Pacific, Schockley's Jewelers
  - 12 1349 Pacific, Roberts
  - 13 1345 Pacific, Revelation
  - 14 1201 Pacific, The Hihn Building
  - 15 1125 Pacific, Athletic Express
  - 16 1123 Pacific, Gensler-Lee Diamonds
  - 17 1121 Pacific, Pipeline Smoke and Gifts
  - 18 1117 Pacific, Logos Books and Records
  - 19 1110 Pacific, Good Times
  - 20 1111 Pacific, The Hotel Metropole Building
  - 21 1101 Pacific, Ford's Department Store
  - 22 1012 Pacific, Greenpeace, Upper Crest
  - 23 1001 Pacific, Spodick's Furniture Store
- These may be demolished**
- \* 1520 Pacific, St. George Hotel
  - \*\* 1208 Pacific, Trust Building

enzo River and its proximity to two active faults. The county noted that old brick buildings were of the greatest risk in quakes and vowed to identify hazardous buildings and begin a program to reinforce them.

■ In 1976, the Santa Cruz City Council voted unanimously to include a "Seismic Safety Element" in the city's general plan. The quake study identified downtown Santa Cruz as a "seismic hazard zone" with a high potential for liquefaction and severe ground shaking.

■ In 1977, the city studied the possibility of renovating the upper floors of older buildings on the mall and found that several turn-of-the-century brick buildings had seismic problems. City planners urged owners to improve their buildings and held workshops on ways to finance the construction costs, but few did any seismic work because they said it was too expensive.

Ten years later, in 1987, former Santa Cruz building chief David Steeves drafted an ordinance that would have required owners to reinforce unsafe brick buildings.

The Downtown Association, citing the economic burden on many of its members, went on record against Steeves' proposal. Neal Coonerty, a merchant who was then chairman of the city's Downtown Commission, also spoke against the proposed ordinance because it could drive merchants away.

Coonerty rented space in a downtown building that housed the Bookshop Santa Cruz. It was that building that collapsed and killed Shawn McCormick and Robin Ortiz.

The City Council discussed Steeves' proposal in a little-known closed session and decided not to pursue it.

"We did not see the sense of



Only 22, Robin Ortiz was committed to her career. In three years, she had risen to the position of production supervisor at the Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Co.

But on October 17, Ortiz had hoped to leave the office early to meet companion Ruth Rabowitz at a cafe. Ortiz could not find a co-worker to trade places with her; she would stay until her shift ended at 6 p.m.

The quake struck at 5:04 p.m. Ortiz's body was buried under more than 6 feet of rubble and was not retrieved for nearly two days.

"The hard thing for all of us is that we are being constantly reminded," said her boss, Colleen Crosby. "We keep finding invoices and things in Robin's handwriting."



Shortly before the earthquake, Shawn McCormick asked his girlfriend out to dinner and for a drive up the coast to watch the sunset.

The blond, 21-year-old bookkeeper at the coffee company was putting away his computer when the quake hit, burying him under 4 feet of rubble.

After a troubled youth, McCormick had begun a new life centered on the family-like coffee company, where he quickly became a respected employee. "All he needed was an opportunity," Crosby said.

McCormick was the father of a 22-month-old girl named Amber.



Kay Trieman, 75, was worried about the health of her husband, Ross, when she stopped in Ford's Department Store in downtown Santa Cruz on October 17.

"She had just visited him in the hospital. It looked like he would have to go into a convalescent home, and she dreaded that," said Tess Santana, a friend of 40 years.

Earlier in the day, the grandmother of four had gone to her aerobics dance class.

"It seems fitting she got to do the two things she loved, shopping and dancing, on her last day," Santana said.

passing an ordinance without putting the funding sources in place to implement it," Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt said. "We were not ignoring this. We have all been worried about this for years, but the real issue is, how do you put money together to do it?"

### Statewide Program

Rather than pass Steeves' ordinance, Wormhoudt said, the City Council decided to work with state Senator Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, to develop a statewide program to finance reinforcement of commercial buildings.

The Mello bill would have allowed communities to create special taxing districts that could sell bonds and use the money to make privately owned buildings safe in earthquakes. However, the measure did not require building owners to participate.

The law passed easily in the Senate and the Assembly, but Governor Deukmejian vetoed it on September 15 of this year.

"I'm devastated that three people were killed," Wormhoudt said. "But if you are asking me if I have second thoughts about our approach, the truth is I don't."

But some business owners on the mall say the City Council's decision should have been the result of a vigorous public debate rather than a private discussion.

"If the city fathers and mothers knew there was a public safety is-

sue, then the downtown should have been shut down and the improvements made — no matter what the cost or consequences," restaurant owner Camera said. "In the end, that's what happened anyway. The downtown is shut down."

When the city did not order earthquake safety improvements to older buildings, the decisions were left to the property owners. Although some owners voluntarily assumed responsibility for the work and did the necessary repairs, others said they simply did not have the money.

The two unreinforced brick buildings responsible for Santa Cruz's deaths had not been strengthened to withstand a severe earthquake, although records and interviews show that the owners knew their structures were at risk.

Harold Morris was the owner of Plaza Books, which fell onto Ford's Department Store and killed 75-year-old Kay Trieman. Ronald Lau owns the Bookshop Santa Cruz building, which collapsed onto the Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Co. and killed McCormick and Ortiz. Both Morris and Lau said lack of money was the reason they had delayed the safety work.

"We were all aware of the problem of these buildings, and we worked on various solutions," said Carole Nelson, a city planner. "But years went by, and we ran out of time. . . . Seismic safety never galvanized this community."

Even though the council decid-

failure during a significant earthquake," Kaztlberger wrote in an October 12 memo to Wilson, just five days before the quake. "The potential for loss of life and/or injury is very high should these structures be occupied during such an event."

Kaztlberger and Building Official Dick Stubendorf attached a list of 21 Santa Cruz buildings that might collapse in a quake but excluded an additional 25 that had been designated as historic landmarks.

### No Mandatory Repairs

The state Seismic Safety Commission had encouraged cities to include all hazardous buildings in their inventories, including historic ones, and to begin programs to fix them. In the absence of a strict state mandate, however, Santa Cruz and many other cities chose not to require building owners to make their structures safer.

"It's clear now that we would have been well served to have been on the leading edge in earthquake safety, but it was not clear then," Santa Cruz City Manager Richard Wilson said. "We were waiting for the lead from the state."

Many earthquake experts hope that the devastation on the Pacific Garden Mall will push other cities to address the danger of some 50,000 unreinforced buildings still standing across the state.

"We must act now or we'll lose the chance," said Gary Griggs, professor of earth sciences at the University of California at Santa Cruz. "Three years from now, society will be worrying about the next crisis, whether it be medflies or AIDS. There are blocks in Hayward, Oakland and San Francisco that will be the next Santa Cruz if we don't do something."

Now, with substantial parts of the downtown in ruins, Santa Cruz is drafting a law that would require the owners of unreinforced masonry buildings to strengthen them.

But that prospect is of little comfort to those who knew Shawn McCormick, the father of a 22-month-old daughter; Robin Ortiz, a young woman working hard on her career; and Kay Trieman, a grandmother who loved to dance.

"My life will never be the same, and the lives of their families will never be the same," said Anne Gfeller, a friend and co-worker of Ortiz and McCormick. "It's important to establish accountability in situations like this. Earthquakes are an act of God, but building buildings is an act of man."