

# THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

16 years after the Loma Prieta quake, Watsonville residents still wonder if downtown will heal



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Gottschalks now operates on the Main Street site in Watsonville where Ford's Department Store stood before it was destroyed by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

*Earthquake - Ten years and later*

By **DONNA JONES**  
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**WATSONVILLE** — Watsonville's historic downtown was already on shaky economic ground when the Loma Prieta earthquake rumbled through on Oct. 17, 1989.

For years, the pull of suburban malls and shopping centers had been transforming the once regional commercial draw into a neighborhood shopping district.

The more than 50 buildings destroyed or damaged by the earthquake only seemed to seal the downtown's fate.

But while the downtown reconstruction

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has lagged behind that of Santa Cruz, whose commercial core also was ravaged by the quake, city leaders point to years of steady rebuilding. Recovery — maybe, some say, even a renaissance — may be in sight.

Just a handful of privately owned lots remain vacant in the downtown, and, driven by the benefits expected from a new Civic Plaza nearby, construction is slated

to start on two of the empty lots in the next few weeks.

"Watsonville is totally different since the earthquake," said David Baker, whose family has run Baker Bros. Furniture downtown for 37 years. "It's a heck of a lot better."

Some, though, wonder whether the changes to the downtown are enough to overcome the economic forces that have been pushing against it for years.

Many merchants bemoan the lack of foot traffic downtown, seeing shoppers head to outlying places like Target and Home Depot, and wonder if projects in the

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**DAVID BAKER, BAKER BROS. FURNITURE**

# Quake

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works can lure people back.

"Honestly, I'm not very confident," said Jim Aguirre, who has struggled to keep his small appliance store on Main Street afloat. "I wish I was."

## The long wait

The shaking lasted just 15 seconds, but it was enough to doom some of the city's most notable landmarks. Gone forever are Ford's department store with its fountain and wooden staircases and the treasured brick Odd Fellow's building on East Beach and Union streets.

But gone, too, are the narrow old-fashioned buildings with dark interiors that owners found difficult to rent and the wooden sewer pipes, relics of another century that lurked beneath the streets.

Just as the quake forced the city to replace the aging infrastructure, some say it gave the city a chance to fix all that was wrong with the downtown, to once again make it a vital commercial center.

Among plans developed with the help of consultants from the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Land Institute — a group more recently tapped to help with New Orleans reconstruction — was securing a permanent downtown home for Cabrillo College, which then offered classes in a Main Street storefront.

The consultants also urged the city to bring county courts, the post office and other civic institutions to the southern end of Main Street and build more housing in the city center.

All are in place or in progress. Hundreds of students now come downtown to attend classes at Cabrillo's satellite campus on Union Street from the City Plaza. Construction of the four-story Civic Plaza, which will house courts, city administration and a greatly expanded public library, started last month.

The accomplishments didn't come easy. The earthquake devastation was felt throughout the city. More than 800 dwellings and 100 commercial buildings were lost.

At about the same time, the city's frozen food industry — a cornerstone of the economy — also collapsed as plants relocated to Mexico to take advantage of cheaper labor and a new free trade agreement.

"It was a double whammy," said City Councilman Oscar Rios, who was elected to the council shortly after Loma Prieta.

Gary Smith, who was fire chief at the time of the earthquake, said things were so bad he had to take a second job as assistant city manager.

"(After the quake) we had fires, gas leaks, collapsed buildings," Smith said. "We thought that was the challenge. What turned out to

## Loma Prieta earthquake facts

■ 5:04 p.m. Oct. 17, 1989, a 6.9 earthquake struck 8 miles north of Aptos

■ Strongest quake on San Andreas Fault since 1906 earthquake

■ Felt from Oregon to Southern California

■ Six Santa Cruz County residents died

■ 90 aftershocks over 3 on Richter scale

■ 300 injured

■ 3,000 homeless

■ Hundreds of homes unsafe or destroyed

■ Hundreds of businesses damaged or destroyed displacing thousands of workers

■ 50 percent of the buildings in downtown Santa Cruz eventually had to be demolished

■ \$1 billion in estimated damages

■ \$70 million in losses to frozen food industry and agriculture

■ Historic Cooper House, St. Patrick's Church badly damaged

■ Ford's Department stores damaged in both Santa Cruz and Watsonville

■ Highway 17 and 129 closed, Highway 1 damaged on Harkins Slough Bridge, Pajaro Bridge damaged

SOURCE: *Second Harvest Food Bank, Sentinel files*



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Although the Watsonville center of commerce has shifted to the shopping centers on the west side of the city, Main Street maintains a small-town feel.

friendly to walkers as Pacific Avenue is in Santa Cruz.

Aguirre, the merchant, bought E.L. Vacuum Center across Main Street from Gottshalks after the earthquake. He said the downtown died after the earthquake, and he doesn't think it will ever come back. There's too little foot traffic, he said.

His efforts to find ways to turn a profit are evident. In addition to vacuum cleaners and sewing machines that should be the store's bread and butter, his shelves hold products as diverse as soccer shirts and Pond's cleansing cream.

Even Gottshalks, downtown's premier store, found the market tough going. The city lured the store with a \$500,000 loan, and store officials have twice negotiated more favorable terms. The store pays no interest on the loan now, and if it remains open until 2008 the principal will be forgiven.

He only survives, Aguirre said, because the business is family-owned and has no employees.

"It doesn't mean we're in good shape," he said. "We're struggling."

## Steady progress

Still, optimism is growing. City leaders have long pinned their hopes for revitalization on



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Ford's Department Store at Beach and Main streets fell during the Loma Prieta earthquake and the ensuing demolition in 1989.

the construction of the long-awaited Civic Plaza. Work started last month and is expected to be completed in 2007.

With Santa Cruz County Superior Court facilities and a large public library, the building will help make downtown a destination, city leaders say.

And the lawyers, clerks and others who will work in the government center will patronize restaurants and shops in the area, too.

"A lot is going to be determined

two vacant parcels on the earthquake shattered 300 block. Both parcels are directly across Second Street from the Civic Plaza. One, a small sliver of land at Main and Second, will provide retail space and apartments. Retail and office space is planned for the other, at Second and Rodriguez.

The downtown is coming back, said Baker, the furniture store owner. He renovated 16 years ago to repair earthquake damage, and recently went through the process again, this time to capture new business generated by housing subdivisions built during the last few years.

People who have the cash for homes priced at more than \$600,000 want nice things to put inside them, he said.

"We're here for the long haul," Baker said. "I don't look back. I'm a business guy, always looking ahead to the future."

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by the market," said City Manager Carlos Palacios. "We're hoping to be a catalyst."

It's a scheme that appears to be working.

Planning is in the final stages for

labor and a new free trade agreement.

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Gary Smith, who was fire chief at the time of the earthquake, said things were so bad he had to take a second job as assistant city manager.

"(After the quake) we had fires, gas leaks, collapsed buildings," Smith said. "We thought that was the challenge. What turned out to be the real challenge was recovery."

## Tough times for some

Some say downtown recovery has been elusive, in part, because

about the continuing struggle for survival. What ails the downtown, they say, isn't the lack of buildings. It's the lack of people with money to spend.

On a weekday morning, young women push strollers past the bargain stores, check-cashing businesses and western wear retailers that line Main Street. A few shoppers carry plastic bags with small purchases.

The Goodwill Store at the corner of Main and East Lake Avenue is the busiest downtown shop.

Most of the traffic isn't pedestrian at all. For most of its length, Main Street is also a state highway, and cars and trucks rush up and down its four lanes, a reality that makes it difficult for Watsonville to create a center as

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