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Watsonville High era ends

Students, staff prepare to move from 'unsafe' main building

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WATSONVILLE — After 73 years, the halls of Watsonville High School's main building will go silent.

The two-story structure will be shut in the next several weeks because of fears that it is unsafe.

"It was a blow," said Principal Tony Calvo. "We are disappointed we are going to have to move. Everyone hopes the building can be saved. It is a wonderful old building."

On Thursday, the day after officials decided to close it, students still walked through the building's halls and ate lunch on the venerable front steps.

Classes will continue in the 1917 Building, named for the year it opened, until temporary facilities are arranged.

The building is the central site on campus, said sophomore Monika Aguirre.

"Everyone has to go in there one time or another," she said.

The structure houses 12 classrooms, administrative offices, the counseling and career centers and the auditorium.

About 15 years ago, Dana Sales walked the same halls.

On Wednesday, Sales was one of the school board members making the decision to close the building.

"It is easily one of the most emotional issues that could happen during my term as a trustee," he said. "It is one of the oldest buildings in the district."

Building experts told Sales and the other trustees that studies of cracks found

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in the building after the Oct. 17 earthquake showed the concrete to be substandard.

"I cannot say it is safe," said Arthur Weatherbe, consulting structural engineer. "Therefore, I'm obligated to say it is unsafe."

According to Weatherbe, when the building was built, a poor-quality concrete was used in the exterior walls.

"The concrete is the whole key to this building," he said.

The necessary repairs and the costs are still unknown.

Called the "flagship of the district" by Trustee Jeff Hancock, the building received a major facelift just two years ago. About \$3.5 million was spent to renovate the building and replace its old furniture.

According to Calvo and several students, there is no nervousness about remaining in the 1917 Building until relocatable classrooms are arranged.

"The situation hasn't really changed," Calvo said. "We've been here since the quake, and a lot of the conditions existed before the quake."

There has been no change in attendance or attitude, he said.

There may have been fears about going into the building after the October earthquake, but people are now used to being in it, said Aguirre and her friends.

"If the building hasn't fallen down now, why should it fall down later?" said Aguirre.

Many teachers are also committed to the old building.

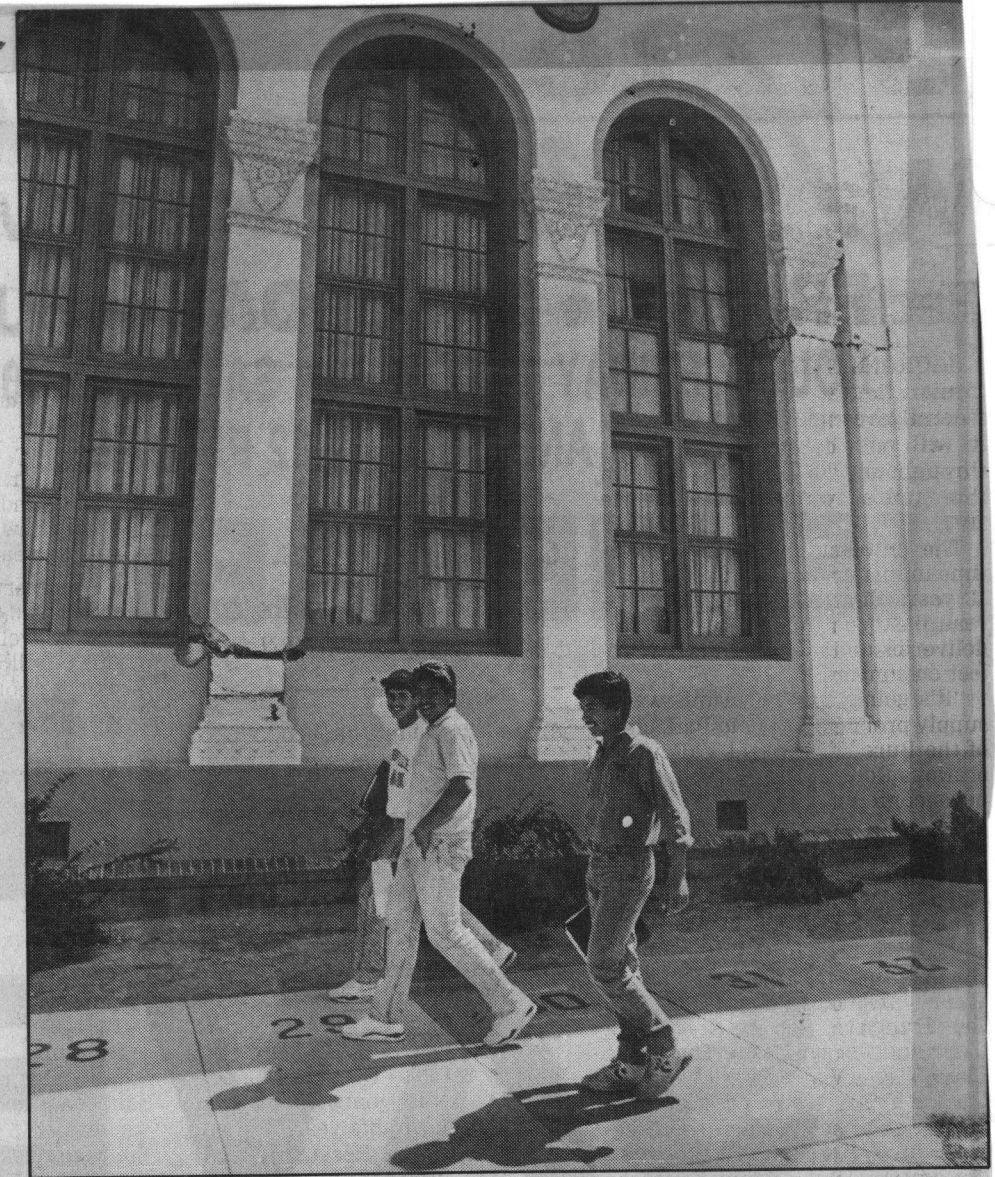
Ronald Jones, speaking on behalf of the social studies department, told trustees that instructors want to continue teaching in the building if it all possible.

"Unless it is deemed unsafe, we would like to stay," he said, adding that there was about seven more weeks of school along with an Easter break next week.

If it is closed, Jones urged trustees to work to save it.

Although he is prepared for the worst, Sales said he is also hopeful the building can be preserved.

"I'm hoping when the final numbers come in, we can save it," he said. "I don't want to see it go down."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

After 73 years, the halls of Watsonville High's 1917 Building will fall quiet.