

Watsonville still building after the quake

By BRIAN SEALS

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WATSONVILLE — On the north end of Main Street, the stained-glass windows of St. Patrick's Catholic Church glisten majestically in the sun.

Blocks away at the downtown Plaza, middle-age men sit on benches passing the afternoon away. Teenagers flock to the Fox Theater and to the pizza parlor next door.

Just about any weekday will find the downtown dotted with students and townspeople shopping at the mostly mom-and-pop stores that fill the storefronts. A newcomer to town probably wouldn't even know that the bulk of downtown Watsonville was destroyed by earthquake just 14 years ago.

"I think downtown looks better than it ever has," said lifelong resident and former City Councilman Dennis Osmer, who watched the city's postquake redevelopment take shape.

The quake, initially measured a 7.1 magnitude but later downgraded to 6.9, destroyed 850 houses and apartments as well as 100 commercial and industrial buildings. On the quake's fifth anniversary, the Federal Emergency Management Agency estimated total damage at \$1.3 billion.

A combination of city leadership, business savvy and government loans, though, helped restart the town.

The redevelopment effort was in place long before the 15-second quake shook the region. Watsonville leaders, as early as the '70s, were searching for ways to

restore luster to the city center — a challenge not uncommon in many older American cities.

"Even before the earthquake, there were abandoned buildings," recalled former City Councilman Oscar Rios, elected to office just weeks after the quake.

But unlike Santa Cruz to the north, downtown was never a Northern California bohemian outpost. Watsonville was, and remains, more of a working class enclave.

"Santa Cruz has a university to draw from," said Jan Davison of the city's Redevelopment Agency, adding that it also lures tourists. "Watsonville... we are the urban center for the agriculture industry."

This meant a much different approach to reinvigorating the downtown. The difference was in the marketing.

Today, the shops found near the core business area cater to the city's Latino population.

The rumblings of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake coincided with socio-political rumblings that brought more Latinos into politics.

When the earthquake hit that October, the city was weeks away from its first election in which residents voted by district, meaning the emerging Latino population was more likely to get a place at the City Council table.

"One of the things we wanted to concentrate on (in the redevelopment) was to make a downtown that reflects the population here," Rios said.

In many ways, though, the business composition is similar to what it was

before the quake — mom and pop shops, some banks and restaurants and a major retail anchor in the form of Gottschalks.

Another feature of the redevelopment was housing. After the earthquake, the city began focusing on rebuilding with retail stores on ground floors while allowing for housing on upper levels and emphasizing pedestrian-friendly streets.

Much of the approach to rebuilding downtown stemmed from an organization called the Urban Land Institute. The group began a series of meetings in 1990 on downtown design guidelines.

This led to 1996 revisions to the city's zoning rules, allowing housing in the downtown district and encouraging retail space on the ground levels of Main Street buildings.

"That really was the springboard," said John Doughty, director of the city's Community Development Department.

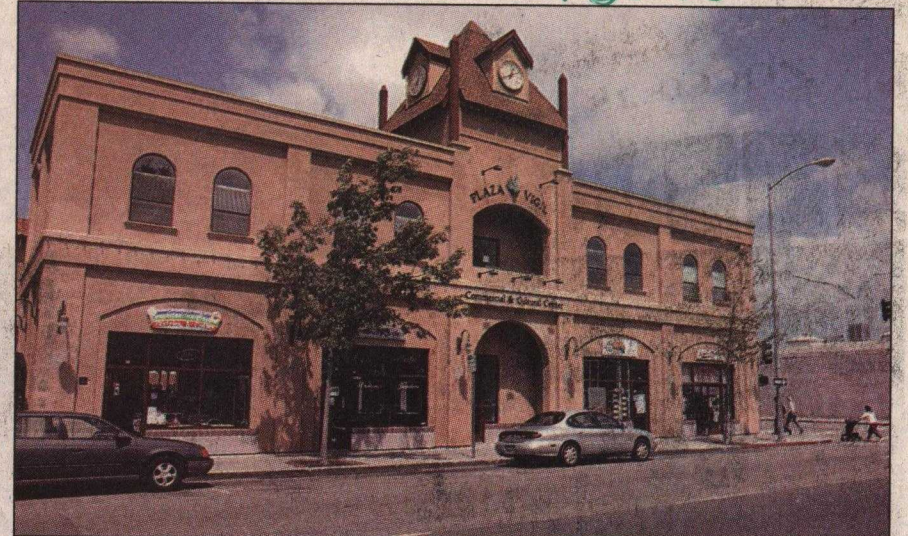
The quake, though, robbed the city of some landmarks it can never replace.

The huge Odd Fellow Temple that featured a colonnaded clock tower has been supplanted by a much smaller Plaza Vigil, with architectural features reminiscent of the old building.

Some buildings, though, managed to survive.

Perhaps the most notable was the old Ford's department store building, a city fixture since the mid-1800s. Saving it required the help of a whopping \$24.5 million Small Business Administration loan. The Charles Ford Co. went out of business in 1992.

Today the building houses a Gottschalks department store that serves as a retail



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Plaza Vigil building has architectural features similar to the Odd Fellow Temple, which it replaced after the earthquake.

anchor, lured in with city money.

However, city leaders agree recovery is still a work in progress.

One large void along Main Street isn't the result of shifting ground. Well before the earthquake hit, buildings on the 200 block were razed to make way for a civic plaza project.

This effort continues today. The city was tantalizingly close last year to making the vision a reality, preparing to build a complex with government offices, a library and court space as well as retail shops and housing.

The project, though, was downsized as

the economy shrank and has been temporarily suspended until the state budget picture clears.

Yet, the City Council earlier this month approved permits needed for the building and received an extension on a \$2.75 million federal grant that will build a parking garage for the complex.

Downtown has also been enlivened by a Cabrillo College center offering classes on Union Street and an adult education program operated on Main Street.

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