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Kurt Ellison

The Porter Building, at Main and Maple streets, has been off-limits since the 1989 earthquake.

FEMA to pay for Porter Building repairs

FEMA has finally agreed to pay for repairs to the earthquake-damaged Porter Building, Watsonville's acting Assistant City Manager Gary Smith told the City Council last night.

City officials and the Porter Building Associates, the group trying to renovate the building, met yesterday afternoon to put together a work plan.

The city first applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for funds to repair the building two years ago. Most recently, the city's application had gotten bogged down be-

cause FEMA didn't want to pay for earthquake-safety features or for an elevator in the building, now required by law, and city officials had appealed to U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta for help.

Smith said his own persistence with FEMA paid off, because he "finally reached the right person," and convinced him the city's requests were reasonable.

Smith said all of the estimated \$475,000 needed for repairs, except \$23,000, is expected to arrive within 10 days and the balance should come through in 60. He said the building should be

completely repaired and ready for occupancy in a year.

Nancy Hendee, one of the Porter Associates, called the agreement with FEMA a "major breakthrough." She said design and engineering work should be completed in four to six weeks, after which the group will meet with the city to expedite permit processing and getting out a bid package.

She said the group will continue talks with public and non-profit agencies interested in leasing the building, including the Pajaro Valley Arts Council,

which is considering having a gallery there. Hendee said the group hoped to make non-profits and public agencies its main tenants.

The city owns the land under the building and had leased the building to Porter Associates, under an agreement that would return it to city control in 25 years. The city recently dissolved the lease to expedite FEMA funding — FEMA pays for repair of public buildings. It is expected that Porter Building Associates will again pick up the lease.

—Chela Zabin