

# Cliffhanger ends; El Centro's open

Pacific Ave

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## Housing group gambles, wins

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SANTA CRUZ — The bankers tried to back out. The contractor pulled out the halfway through. The project changed sites, architects, lawyers and construction managers.

The future of the Community Housing Corp. was gambled on being able to finish the El Centro on Pacific Avenue.

Community Housing Corp. won the gamble. Thursday was the day of celebration.

Ribbons, balloons, speeches, cake and tours accompanied the grand opening of the El Centro, a new four-story, affordable-housing hotel for the elderly.

El Centro's upper three floors include 44 furnished rooms, arranged around a south facing courtyard with ocean views. The ground floor is a commercial "mercado" with shops and restaurants, which will open for business in March.

Behind the facade of colorful Mexican tiles is a project that began just a few months after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

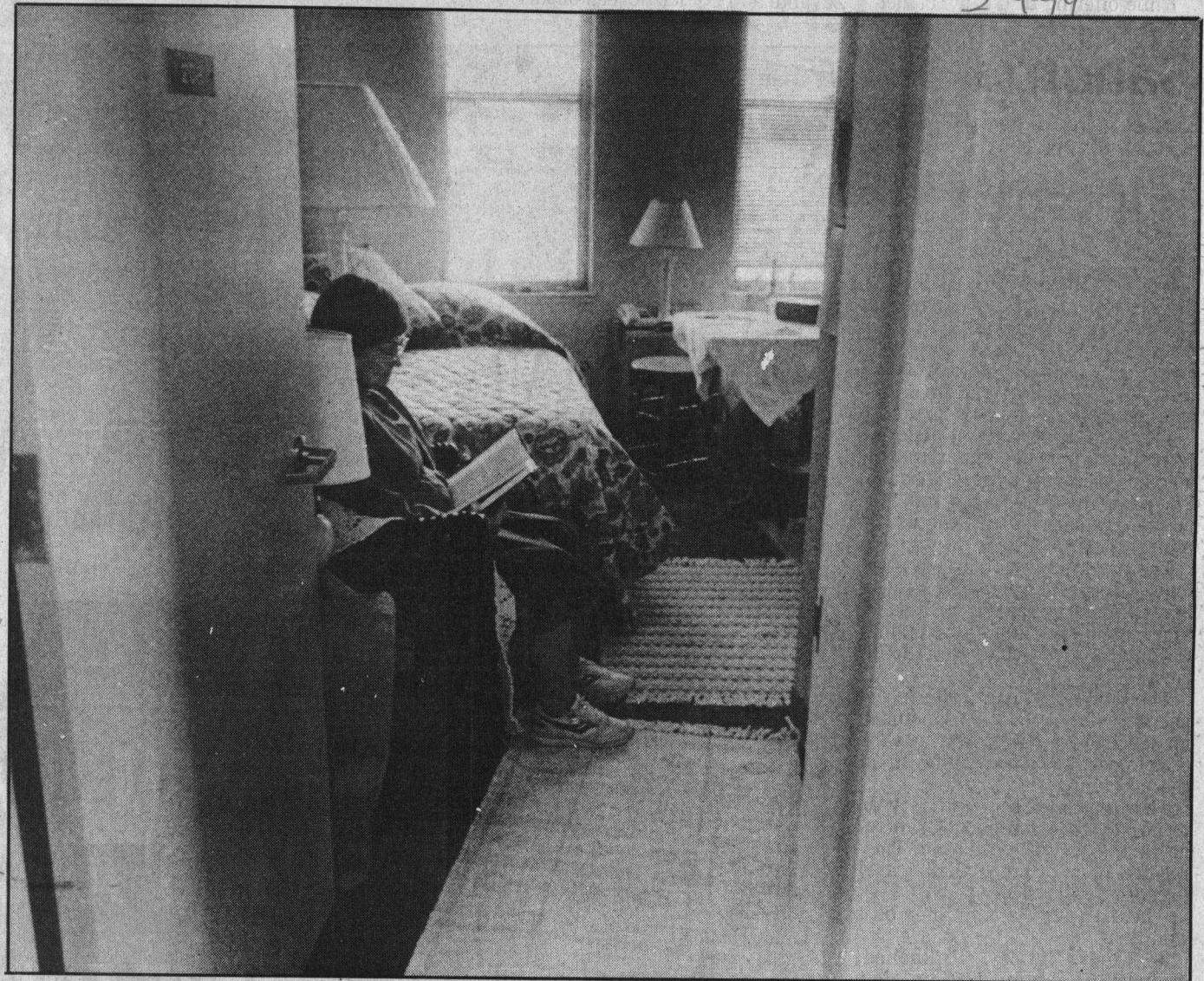
A change of sites was the first of many changes in the four years. Since then, the non-profit housing developer's builder almost went out of business and had to be replaced. Work stopped for a half-year and the project ran roughly a half-million dollars over budget. Bankers, lawyers, architects, and virtually "every player" changed, said Bruce Van Allen, the project manager for Community Housing Corp.

So tumultuous were the events, Van Allen quipped, that he had considered printing T-shirts, "I survived El Centro."

To complete the center, Community Housing Corp. pulled funds from its other projects, said Arnie Fischman, director. Then, when construction resumed, the corporation scrambled for money to repay its other projects.

The center faced a construction deadline of Dec. 31, or it would lose \$1.2 million of investments, Fischman said.

Devcon Construction Inc. finished



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

El Centro resident Aliide Borgerson reads in her apartment in the downtown project.

work Dec. 17, the exact day originally projected. A \$360,000 loan from the Packard Foundation closed Dec. 23, he said.

"It was a big gamble," acknowledged Fischman. "It could have been the end of the Community Housing Corp. if we hadn't been able to pull it off."

None of that was as important to Gladys Adair Thursday as the view of

Pacific Avenue from her room.

Adair, 74, moved in Tuesday and already had pictures of her family displayed. For \$319 a month, her furnished room includes a microwave, sink, refrigerator, bathroom and bed. It has more cabinet space than she expected or needed. "I think it's very lovely," she said.

The suites are designed to offer residents self-sufficiency with advantages

of group living, said Van Allen. Besides the resident's private room, each suite has a south-facing common kitchen and living room and two full baths.

The rooms will be rented to people over age 62, with incomes below \$16,380. About half the rooms are spoken for, said Fischman.

Those interested in living in El Centro can call 459-8290 or 457-5725.