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Fair promotes quake education

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As an engineer for the Los Angeles Department of Public Works' Earthquake Recovery Division, Andy Santamaria spent a lot of time in Northridge after the 1994 earthquake. On Saturday, he noticed subtle improvements in the community as he drove in from Port Hueneme, where he now serves as director of public works.

"It's the fences. The brick walls came down and cracked, so they've all been replaced," he said. "That's why it all looks new. And you notice that lots of windows have been replaced with double-pane ones, earthquake-resistant ones."

When Santamaria arrived at an earthquake preparedness fair sponsored by the Northridge West Neighborhood Council on Saturday morning, there were lots more reminders of the Jan. 17, 1994, quake that shattered buildings, structures and lives across the Valley and Southern California.

The fair drew a wide variety of exhibitors and hundreds of visitors to the Gelson's shopping center on Plummer Street and Shirley Avenue.

In 1994, the site of the center had been a vacant lot within sight of the Northridge Fashion Center, which was heavily damaged in the quake.

Exhibitors ran the gamut from search-and-rescue dog squads -- and their human counterparts -- to scout troops, from government agencies to merchants selling quake preparation kits.

"There were many more (exhibitors) than we expected," said Judie Levin-Sanchez, a member of the Neighborhood Council and one of the organizers of the fair.

Among the exhibits were touching, somewhat eerie reminders of the quake's fury. On display at the Department of Public Works stand were maps that engineers had created shortly after the quake, showing where buildings had been destroyed and damaged, where rubble had been bulldozed away. The dots denoting destruction and recovery efforts, concentrated most heavily in the Valley, nevertheless spread across the entire city, from one border to the other.

Recovery efforts will continue for years. Repairs to the sewer system aren't expected to be completed until 2007.

Another exhibit was a collection of photographs of earthquake-created "ghost towns" -- apartment and condominium buildings completely destroyed or so heavily damaged that they were abandoned and later razed. Photos of these structures -- including some at Saticoy and Alabama, and at Orion and Parthenia -- are sometimes all that remains of them.

But memories -- and changed behaviors -- remain in the quake's wake.

"Our house had thousands of dollars of damage -- many thousands. We bought an RV that we lived in while the house was being repaired. We lived in it for nine months," said Mary Finley of Northridge, who came to do her grocery shopping but stopped to check out a display of earthquake readiness supplies.

"Now, it's always ready. It's like a very large emergency kit," she said with a laugh. Organizers specifically chose this weekend for the fair, in part because they did not want to intrude upon the commemorations they know will be taking place on the weekend of the quake's 10-year anniversary.

"That will be a time to reflect," said Jim Alger, another Neighborhood Council member who's personally seen his share of trauma.

Alger was in Candlestick Park when the Loma Prieta quake hit in 1989, and he helped dig through the rubble of the World Trade Center in New York after the terrorist strikes of 9-11.

"This weekend is a time to prepare. ... It could have been so much worse. We get complacent, but we've also been very lucky. And another earthquake here -- it's just a question of when," he said.