



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Maria Ramos, her eight kids and their aunts and uncles are living in a makeshift tent on Watsonville High's Geiser Field.

*Earthquake 1989 - Watsonville*

# Life goes on in Tent City

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## Watsonville families offer relief prayers

By JAMIE MARKS  
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WATSONVILLE — Spaghetti noodles and chicken soup were being passed around an open campfire Thursday evening at Watsonville High's soccer field, as Jesus Ramos and 21 of his family's friends prepared for another night in Tent City.

Throughout Watsonville, makeshift tent cities have been set up by residents forced out of their homes, or too scared to return.

People are living under sheets and tents at the vacant 200 block of Main Street, Watsonville High School's soccer field, Callaghan Park and in front of and behind many homes.

"We can't go back to our house. We're scared it might fall down," said 14-year-old Ramos, as he sat beside the open fire.

Similar dinners were being prepared by 20 other groups at the soccer field, as families tried to cope with the devastation of Tuesday's big earthquake and the aftershocks that have jolted the area since.

A small baby was sleeping in his dad's arms, while parents passed out servings of food.

In Ramos' group, 13 children and eight adults are sharing living quarters until they can figure out where to move. If it rains, they will move back to their homes right away; if not, Ramos said they'll stay out until Tuesday to avoid being inside during further aftershocks.

Watsonville officials have upgraded the number of homes destroyed to 150, with 293 sustaining minor damage.

Chief Building Inspector Neil England placed a "conservative" estimate on the dollar amount of damage at \$48 million to dwellings and \$75 million to commercial and industrial buildings.

"At least half of downtown is destroyed, from St. Patrick's Church through the 100 block of Main Street," England said Friday morning. Before officials will open the downtown, they will have to



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Families displaced by the earthquake are living in a tent city at Geiser Field in Watsonville.

demolish the buildings that are unsafe, he said.

The damage to homes is making the critical housing shortage much worse.

"We'll use the National Guard Armory as a long-term shelter, and we'll be meeting today on the long-term housing situation," said Public Information Officer Lorraine Washington.

"Housing is definitely our biggest problem," added Planning Director Maureen Owens. "We'll be meeting today to go over our long-term solutions, but definitely this has made a bad situation much worse."

For Alan and Audrey Lightner, 22 years of life on Lincoln Street was shattered in less than a minute in Tuesday's big earthquake.

"Our house is split totally in the middle," said Audrey Lightner, as she stood in front of the demolished home, watching her neighbors moving furniture out of their tilted home.

"We've been living in a tent in our backyard," said Audrey Lightner. "There's no way we can go back in."

The Lightners said they'll move into a rental unit behind their home.

About 1,000 other Watsonville residents have been living outside or in emergency shelters as a result of the temblor that struck Tuesday.

In addition, emergency shelters are operating at the Vet's Hall, National Guard Armory and Salvation Army.

Antonia Perez and her husband, Jose Luis Guerrero, who had lived on Lincoln Street for 1½ years until their home collapsed Tuesday, filled two pickup trucks with belongings.

"My landlord told me to move," said Guerrero. "We're going to live with friends in Freedom."

Cars filled with clothing and odds and ends were parked at the vacant 200 block of Main Street, which is to become someday the heart of Watsonville's redevelopment project. Now, the earthquake has handed city officials a staggering job of redevelopment.

A baby crib and beds lay strewn next to Feliciano and Lydia Ramirez' car on the 200 block.

"We were in the apartments above the La Frontera Club," said Feliciano Ramirez. "But now it's posted and I don't think we can go back. I don't know where we'll go next. We'll stay here until we can't any longer."

All through the day, people lined up to get water from water trucks at the City Plaza. A line also formed around the free phones set up at the City Plaza and the high school soccer field, where many people were calling Mexico to let their families know they are safe.

Alfredo Villanueva said he tried to reach his parents in Mexico, but he was unable to get through.

"I think they're worried, so I'll try again," Villanueva said.

As the long, hot afternoon continued to draw people to the City Plaza along the devastated downtown, a group of women and children walked through, carrying crosses and saying prayers.

"We love you Lord, please help us now," they sang in Spanish.

Many people crossed themselves, adding their own prayers.