

Building ban may be lifted

County may let summit folk rebuild at 'own risk'

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SUMMIT — A county policy forbidding the rebuilding of badly damaged or destroyed homes in several mountain neighborhoods could be changed as soon as Tuesday, according to County Supervisor Jan Beautz.

In addition, the Army Corps of Engineers has agreed to conduct a \$600,000 geological study to determine if several mountain neighborhoods are at risk from suspected landslides, Beautz said.

The rebuilding policy applies to "areas of critical concern," where geologists fear possible landslides on land shifted and cracked by the Oct. 17 earthquake. The largest single area of critical concern on the county's map is the Summit neighborhood of Villa del Monte, which geologists fear may have been built atop long-inactive landslides.

Owners of damaged homes in critical areas were told the county would not issue permits to rebuild or repair the structures until major geological studies are complete. Since such studies must encompass a rainy season, permits would not be available until spring at the soonest, county officials said. If this winter is dry, the studies could be delayed another year, officials said.

Many area homeowners opposed the county policy, saying that repairs were needed to protect their homes through the winter. Residents also object to having their homes placed in a bureaucratic limbo, although many admit the geological studies are important.

Beautz announced the probable change in policy at a Villa del Monte homeowners' meeting Saturday evening.

"I can't give you an absolute yes," Beautz said. "But I expect some changes in a few days. On Monday or Tuesday I should have more information."

Beautz said that the proposed new policy will allow

Summit/ Residents mobilize

Continued from Page A1

homeowners to rebuild or repair their homes as long as there are no obvious cracks and fissures on their lots. Rebuilding on lots with cracks and fissures in the earth will require a geologist's report before permits can be issued.

Because the stability of the underlying ground will not be determined until spring at the earliest, each individual homeowner will have to make the repairs at his or her own risk, Beautz said.

"We'll need to (have you) sign a form to cover our liability," Beautz said. "So to some degree it's at your own risk. But that's what I heard you saying, that you're willing to accept that risk."

Beautz fought for the policy change because "it doesn't seem reasonable to make you wait so long" to begin repairs, she said.

At an earlier community meeting, county officials said they didn't have the money to begin geological studies on the areas of critical concern. But on Thursday, officials from the Army Corps of Engineers said they would undertake the study, which will cost an estimated \$600,000, Beautz said.

"It was a verbal commitment, it's not in writing yet," Beautz said. But she seemed certain of the Corps' commitment.

Beautz's comments were greeted with loud applause from the assembled homeowners, who praised her responsiveness.

But mountain residents are used to handling problems themselves, and the Villa del Monte homeowners were far from pacified by the county's willingness to compromise. The group voted unanimously to look for their own geologist, soil engineer and attorney to answer technical questions and deal with the county.

Divided into committees, Villa residents are now mapping the locations and sizes of fissures and sites of

drainage problems, and gathering well data for analysis. A technical subcommittee is looking for a qualified geologist who will look at the slide threat "from a Villa point of view...someone unbiased," and a legal committee is searching for an attorney to assess their legal situation.

"We need to hire an attorney with the characteristics of a warehouse rat," said resident Dusty Ruel, drawing laughter from the group. "We want someone who will start pulling arms and legs off people until we get some action. The geologists can contemplate their geologic navels until the world comes to an end, but we'll go to hell in a handbasket unless we can break this logjam."

Residents also volunteered to fill cracks and keep the drainage culverts open to prevent dangerous ground saturation once the rains begin. Resident Harold Lee has recorded a 50-foot rise in the water level of his well since the quake, from 80 feet to 30 feet below the surface.

"We don't need any rain," Lee said. "It couldn't be any more saturated out there."

The rapid rise could be attributed to the breakage of the community's million-gallon reservoir, which saturated the ground after the quake, but a rise in water tables that may be related to compression of the earth's crust has been noted in other areas.

Lee suggested that the water be pumped out of the ground to prevent the saturated hillside from giving way.

"We need to find some answers," said resident Hank Meyer. "We need some confidence in what we want to do. Is it okay to rebuild? We have to do something other than just wait."

Some Villa residents have already moved to answer their questions. One group of 10 families has invested \$12,000 for geologists to begin exploratory borings of a suspected slide in their vicinity.

"We don't expect the government to come in and take care of everything," said one woman.