

Summit-area rebuilding rules may be eased

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SUMMIT — Nearly two years after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake tore their community asunder, Summit residents may finally be getting some order restored to their lives.

An item on today's county Board of Supervisors agenda — co-sponsored by Supervisors Jan Beautz and Fred Keeley — seeks to revise and clarify complicated county policies that Summit residents say have hindered rebuilding efforts and made their lives a "living hell."

The geologic hazards policies, enacted in the aftermath of the 1989 earthquake, have curbed the ability of many Summit residents to piece together homes damaged in the disaster.

To rebuild, homeowners there have been required to sign a waiver absolving the county of future liability. The waiver also allows the county, at any time in the future, to declare Summit property "unsafe to occupy" and to order its demolition. Some have refused to sign the waiver, and thus have

been unable to rebuild.

In addition, the residents have also been baffled and angered by a litany of county-required geological, geo-technical, soils and engineering reports. The complex studies must be reviewed and approved by the county before a rebuilding permit is issued — often, say Summit dwellers, at great monetary and emotional expense to the homeowner.

An estimated 600 Summit homeowners are affected by the county's geological hazards ordinance. A federally funded, \$1.35 million Army Corps of Engineers study has been evaluating geological hazards in the Summit; its preliminary conclusion cites no significant risks to living in the Summit as the result of the 1989 quake and its aftershocks.

As a result of that information, Supervisors Beautz and Keeley are seeking to "ease the burden of rebuilding (in the Summit) while maintaining the level of public safety. ..."

Keeley said the proposed changes are part of an effort by the two

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supervisors to "incrementally chip away at a system we believe was overly complicated in its original construction."

A streamlining, said Keeley, is needed "so that people can get on with their lives ... get on with returning to normal life."

Beautz said she hopes the revisions, if approved by the majority of the board, will signal "the beginning of the end" of the Summit rebuilding story.

Summit residents, meanwhile, are cautious and hopeful the proposed policy revisions will eventually bring closure to the Summit saga.

Hank Meyer, president of the Villa del Monte Emergency Homeowners Association — formed by residents shortly after the earthquake — called the proposed revisions "a real giant step in the right direction." The association last year filed a class-action lawsuit against the county's "onerous" re-

building-waiver, and recently conducted its own counter-study in an effort to disprove theories that the Summit area is underlain with "ancient landslides."

"There are still a few things that are going to be referred, but, by and large, there's a great deal of progress there, things that we've been requesting for almost two years," said Meyer.

Beautz and Keeley are asking the county Planning Department to draft the proposed revisions — some of which are already in use unofficially — and report back to the board Oct. 8.

The recommended changes include:

- Eliminating the demolition powers of the controversial waiver;

- Developing a time line for processing geological reports, guaranteeing that applicants receive a "first response" from the county about a study's merits or drawbacks within three weeks;

- Clearing the lines of communication between a permit seeker, his hired geologist, and the county. Previous county policy of contacting the applicant regarding geological matters, said Keeley and Beautz, was rife with confusion and frustration. The county should instead contact the applicant's geologist — with a carbon going to the homeowner — as it does with other consultants such as architects, said the supervisors.

- Making sure the county's geological hazards guidelines stick to matters of "human safety and not ... long discussions of a more geologically theoretical nature."

- Cross-referencing permit applications to avoid duplication of reports. In the past, the county has sometimes required neighbors who live side by side both to undergo costly geological testing. A referencing system, said Beautz and Keeley, would spare homeowners from "having to redo the analysis every time."

- Eliminating confusing language in the county's geological guidelines to make it clear the policy goal is "rebuilding structures which will be safe for human habitation."

- A rethinking of the "appropriateness" of the county's list of approved geological consultants. Beautz has contended that the list gives the impression that homeowners who need reports in order to obtain a building permit will have an advantage if they hire one of the 15 "approved" professionals on the county's roster.

- "Demystify" the county's geologic policies by printing a list of suggestions to help applicants through the process. "This type of program would help to educate the applicants and could ease their burden as they progress through the system."

The geology issues will be taken up by the board at 1:30 p.m. today, fifth-floor County Government Center.