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Capitola officials surprised by FEMA's latest ruling

CAPITOLA — Planning Director Steve Russell expressed surprise and concern today that Capitola had been suspended from receiving federal disaster assistance due to non-compliance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's new flood-zone guidelines.

Russell told The Sentinel it was his understanding that the city's newly-adopted amended guidelines — which will be in the mail to the agency today — would be satisfactory. Russell also questioned whether the city was officially suspended from federal aid as of Tuesday, according to what agency spokesman Robert Johnson told The Sentinel.

"We haven't received any word — no written correspondence at all — from FEMA that we're suspended," Russell said. "I wouldn't think they would suspend us without official written notification."

But FEMA has done just that, according to Johnson.

He said this morning that regulations call for Capitola's suspension "effective immediately" because the guidelines are not in receipt or been approved by the agency as of the Aug. 15 deadline. Johnson went on to say that "official written notification" would probably be in the mail to Capitola today.

Whether or not the city's amended flood-zone guidelines are satisfactory to the agency, Capitola is suspended from receiving federal disaster assistance until actual agency approval. This means that were a disaster to hit now, the federal government would not lend disaster assistance.

Johnson said the only way Capitola

would get such aid would be through a presidential order. "Right now, Capitola would be last on the list to get federal aid," he said.

Such a disastrous possibility has Russell concerned.

"Yes, it certainly is a concern to the city," Russell said. "But, we're doing what we can. I think we've been showing good intent in adopting our flood-zone guidelines."

Besides leaving the city open to no aid, the agency's suspension could put a hamper on the sale of real estate in Capitola. Federally-assisted loans could be eliminated, preventing banks and savings institutions from making loans.

Capitola's amended flood-zone guidelines include a clause allowing existing building owners within flood-zone boundaries to rebuild as they were if their building is destroyed by any disaster ex-

cept flood, earthquake or tsunami.

The strict new flood-zone guidelines — which call for some buildings to be raised eight feet on stilts — would, therefore, only go into effect if the building were destroyed by flood, earthquake or tsunami.

The amendment represents an important change from the agency's proposed acceptable guidelines. Those call for any reconstruction representing more than 50

percent of what is there now — regardless of disaster — to be rebuilt in conformance to the new guidelines.

The council added the amendment because of fear that other disasters, such as fire, would prevent owners from rebuilding as the structures are today.

Johnson told the council last week it was his "guess" the city's proposed amendment would be acceptable to the agency.