Murphy Camp renovation plan outlined

By KATHY KREIGER Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — It's not quite the final chapter, but a happy ending may be coming in the long-standing and thorny saga of a troubled South County farm labor camp that only a year ago seemed destined for demolition.

County supervisors are expected to OK a \$1.6 million proposal today by the Mid-Peninsula Housing Coalition to fix up and manage Murphy Camp. That includes \$300,000 in county redevelopment funds.

The proposal spells out larger, safer and nicer apartments for less rent than tenants pay now

"We see it as providing a long-term solution for a problem that's gone on for a lot of years," said Tom Burns, head of the county Redevelopment Agency. The agency's contribution will help satisfy its commitment to provide affordable housing in the unincorporated areas of the county. "If it works, it'll be a great deal."

That's if everything goes as planned.

If supervisors approve their piece, Burns said the next step will be nailing down the state housing funds and federal tax credits that will make up most of the rest of the financing.

About \$665,000 is expected from a federal program that offers tax credits for low-income housing; another \$620,000 is expected in state housing rehabilitation funds. The county's \$300,000 contribution represents a subsidy of \$16,500 per unit, Burns said.

"Anything can still happen till the money is secured," Burns said. "... If you follow the talk in Congress, one of the things they're talking about eliminating is tax credits."

Still, Burns was optimistic that the county will soon close the book on the camp, a 40-year-old collection of dilapidated buildings near Murphy Crossing and Highway 129.

Originally built as barracks-style quarters for seasonal, single migrant workers, the buildings were converted over the years into rudimentary apartments for large families.

The camp first made the news in 1982 when a stove exploded, killing a woman and child who lived there.

Since then, a series of owners has been unable to rehabilitate the camp enough to satisfy county officials. Until the county's

Legal Aid Society stepped in on behalf of tenants a year ago, the camp seemed certain to be bulldozed.

Critical to the success of today's proposal was Legal Aid's work in convincing a well-respected non-profit housing developer to repair and manage the camp.

The Mid-Peninsula Housing Coalition already owns and manages more than 2,000 housing units throughout this region. Locally, the group developed the 39-unit Farm project on Soquel Drive, and has been named as the master developer of part of the housing to be built on Soquel's O'Neill Ranch.

Terms of the coalition's proposal include:

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- Reduce the number of units from 32 to 18 by Dec. 31;
- Correct the health and safety violations pointed out by county and state inspectors;
- Maintain existing building shells, building "prints" and rooflines;
- Re-configure the interior layout to create larger family-sized units;
- Install new kitchens and bathrooms;
- Eliminate the narrow interior hallways that made fire officials cringe. Instead, the entrance to each unit will be moved to the outside of the building;
- Improve water and septic systems;
- Build a playground and put up clotheslines;
- Set aside five acres for residents to farm.

Rents are expected to range from \$270 to \$355 per month, excluding utilities. That's compared to the average \$450 per month paid by most residents. Lower rents should eliminate the overcrowding problems common to the camp, according to the housing coalition.

