

Water company gasps for air

By JAMIE S. CACKLER
Sentinel staff writer

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SUMMIT — For the past six weeks, 7-year-old Jessica Barbata has been taking showers at her day-care center. Her dad, Dennis, slips into the shower in the boy's locker room of the school where he works. And her mom, Judy, bathes wherever she can — the homes of friends and colleagues, the hot tub at home.

The Barbatas are one of about 140 families served by the small, private Mountain Charlie Water Works, which suffered about \$500,000 worth of damage in the Oct. 17 earthquake.

Nearly half those customers are still without water.

Judy Barbata said the family is sick of microwaved TV dinners. They buy bottled water to drink, and to heat for washing the few cups and pieces of silverware they use. She keeps the bottles, and

refills them with tap water at friends' homes or gas stations.

"I don't think people are aware that we still don't have water," Barbata said.

Mountain Charlie has the greatest damage of any small water system in the county, according to a report from the county's Environmental Health Department. The department lists 84 small water companies with damage ranging from \$100 to Mountain Charlie's \$500,000.

Other small companies with serious damage include Villa del Monte, \$300,000; Big Redwood Park, \$100,000; and Manana Woods, \$75,000.

The Oct. 17 earthquake destroyed five of Mountain Charlie's six storage tanks and left dozens of breaks in the PVC delivery pipes that snake through the 2,000-acre service area. The area includes Mountain Charlie, Hutchison, Old Japanese, Old Ranch and Old Flat roads, among others, near the intersection of

Highway 17 and Summit Road.

The one 45,000-gallon tank that wasn't destroyed was readied for service, but when operators opened the valves to restart the flow, water began to gush out of leaking pipes throughout the area.

New leaks keep springing every time the system is turned on after pipe repairs, said Wester Sweet, a San Jose attorney who is both president and a customer of Mountain Charlie.

The system is antiquated and has been breaking down for the past two years.

Almost a year ago, a big freeze in the area popped many of the pipes, Sweet said, and ran up huge repair bills. He said he and other residents are nervous as another cold season approaches.

A moderate earthquake during the summer of 1988 cracked the main storage tank, and it had to be repaired.

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Ironically, Sweet said, that tank was the one which made it through the Oct. 17 shock. And, he said, the tank stood fairly fast while homes on each side of it were destroyed.

Then, the system ran completely dry last fall because of the regional drought, and residents faced strict mandatory rations while paying bills up to \$80 month for trucked-in water supplies.

Just before the quake, residents had scheduled a meeting with the Public Utilities Commission to discuss financing a major renovation for the system.

After the quake, they held the meeting anyway, and it turned into a session for talking about how to repair the existing system, according to Sweet and Barbata.

Instead of pointing fingers and grous-

ing about their bad luck, Mountain Charlie customers pulled together in a most extraordinary way, according to residents, Sweet and the PUC.

Sweet had located five 15,000-gallon tanks for sale in Santa Clara Valley, but there was no money to cover the \$23,000 price.

Fourteen customers at the meeting responded by pulling out their personal checkbooks and writing checks to loan to the company for temporary repairs. "One woman stood up and said, 'I need the water more than the water company needs me,' and she wrote out a \$2,000 check," Sweet said. By the time the meeting was over, he had \$13,500 for the purchase of the tanks. A bank officer who is a customer told Sweet his bank would loan the system the rest.

To repay the loans, the residents voted to attach a \$100 surcharge to their November bill. The rest of the money will come out of water-hauling account.

In addition, the residents also voted to attach a \$45 surcharge to their December, January and February bills to pay for an independent engineering study of the Mountain Charlie system.

Sweet said he is trying to get a low-interest emergency repair loan from the Small Business Administration, but the process is moving very slowly. He said he has no idea if Mountain Charlie will get aid, how much it might be, or when it will come.

He said he has been notified that small utilities such as Mountain Charlie do not qualify for public service aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.