

# Trailers from FEMA for city's homeless not a sure thing

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The city of Watsonville has laid plans for housing homeless earthquake victims in mobile homes provided by the U.S. government, but the government is now telling Santa Cruz County officials it may not provide the promised trailers.

Watsonville Planning Director Maureen Owens yesterday told a meeting of housing activists and social workers that the Federal Emergency Management Agency had 100 trailers en route from Texas to Fort Ord, from where they would be distributed among earthquake-ravaged communities, including Watsonville and unincorporated areas of Santa Cruz County.

But Willow Citron, a Santa Cruz County official who is involved in trying to get trailers from FEMA, said the agency had confirmed again this morning that it has not yet approved

trailers for Santa Cruz County.

"The county has requested the coaches," Citron said. "But this morning, we received an official verbal response from FEMA that no coaches have been approved for Santa Cruz County."

Citron said the county would continue to press FEMA for the trailers, which are about 12 feet by 60 feet.

"We are still acting as if we will be installing mobile homes," Citron said, adding that many private mobile-home companies have been trying to strike a deal with the county.

This morning, Watsonville City Clerk Lorraine Washington, who is acting as official spokeswoman for the city, said Watsonville had "received official word that FEMA does not see the need for trailers in Watsonville."

"We are going to ask them to reevaluate that," Washington said. "We are going to contact our representatives in the state and federal government."

Washington said the city hopes FEMA will reverse its decision today.

Meanwhile, Kathy Bernard, of the non-profit Pajaro Valley Housing Corp., said yesterday her agency has 196 modular units it could bring into Santa Cruz County if given the go-ahead and a place to park them. She was reported to be in conference with county officials this morning on that matter.

Yesterday, however, Owens spoke as if the plans for installing FEMA trailers were firm.

She encouraged the housing advocates and social workers to get their clients into local FEMA Disaster Assistance Centers to apply for the trailers.

Under federal regulations, Owens said, families may live in the trailers rent-free for as long as 18 months, although anyone living in the trailers must apply for permission to remain in them every two months.

"People need to show they are looking for other housing after two months, but they can stay up to 18 months," Owens said.

Those made homeless by the earthquake might instead opt to take cash from FEMA for two months' rent in housing they find themselves, Owens said.

Cruz Gomez, a candidate for City Council who has been working with quake victims through the Migrant Media program, said victims must have the choices clearly outlined for them, and understand that they have an either/or choice between payment of two months' rent or free housing in the trailers, if the trailers come, but cannot accept the rent payment, then seek housing in the trailers.

To this end, the city has tentatively scheduled a meeting for Friday at 7:30 p.m. at E.A. Hall Middle School, at which FEMA regulations will be exhaustively explained in Spanish.

Ricardo Delasandro, a counselor with Salud para la Gente, said he is also trying to arrange a meeting tonight at 7 o'clock at Ramsay Park between the quake victims living there and FEMA officials, to get the trailer story straight.

Delasandro said he is very discouraged by his dealings with FEMA.

"So far, it has been a bunch of lies," he said.

City Council candidate Robert Chacanaca, who also attended yesterday's meeting, had a cynical view of the proposed trailer-

housing, even if comes to pass.

"They (FEMA) are going to bring people into these things, then two months later, they're going to be hounding people to get out," Chacanaca said.

He said he thought FEMA workers would be "trying to induce people to accept a payoff for two months' rent, because then they're out of the system and on their own."

If the trailers are approved for Santa Cruz County, Owens said 30 of them would be installed in Watsonville, behind the county courthouse annex on Freedom Boulevard. Others would be placed at the county fairgrounds, and still others might be situated at Pinto Lake Park.

Several people attending the meeting said they thought some trailers should be placed on the 200 block of Main Street, which has stood vacant for years now, awaiting redevelopment.

Owens said the city might be able to use a section of that block slated to be used for a new post office, but that commercial development plans should go forward for the rest of the land, to help downtown recover quickly from the quake devastation.

She said a "benefit of the earthquake" was the destruction of some downtown buildings whose upper floors had already been deemed unsafe to use as housing.

With new buildings, Owens said, upper floors can be designed as high-density apartment complexes, adding more units to Watsonville's housing supply, which was inadequate before the quake hit.

Anyone who has been issued a check by FEMA for two months' rent, but has not yet been able to find housing should hold onto the check for the next 24 to 48 hours, Santa Cruz County Supervisor Sherry Mehl said this morning.

If families have no place to rent, and can hold onto those checks, they may be able to get temporary free housing in trailers the county is trying to persuade the Federal Emergency Management Agency to bring in, Mehl said.

Mehl said FEMA has so far refused to provide the trailers, because rental housing is available within a 25-mile radius of Watsonville. But that would mean people would have to move to Salinas, King City, or southern Santa Clara County, she said.

"We think that's ridiculous," Mehl said.

She said Congressman Leon Panetta is working to bring the trailers to Santa Cruz County.

In addition, if the rental money has been spent, people should keep receipts because that may be the only way to get into a trailer, Mehl said.