

Slow recovery leaves quake victims shaken

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ONE YEAR after Northern California's deadly 7.1-magnitude earthquake, farmworker Jesus Garcia and his family are sharing a single room in a run-down Watsonville motel. The Garcias' apartment was destroyed in the quake and their application for federal housing assistance is still under appeal.

Brent and Erma Browning have not been able to move back into their damaged Santa Cruz mountain home because they are still waiting for county building permits. They have been renting a small house in San Jose since the earthquake.

Michael Pecot continues to manage a health food store out of a

tentlike structure in a Santa Cruz parking lot. Business is off by 60 percent, but he cannot move back to his previous location because it has not yet been rebuilt.

In the days after the earthquake last Oct. 17, much of the nation's attention was focused on the devastated Marina District in San Francisco and the collapsed upper deck of the Nimitz Freeway in Oakland. But, proportionately, there was greater loss near the epicenter in Santa Cruz County — in smaller cities such as Watsonville and Santa Cruz, and in remote hamlets in the nearby mountains.

And today, many of those residents are still struggling. Almost 500 homes in the Santa Cruz Mountains were demolished and

only a handful have been rebuilt. In downtown Santa Cruz entire streets are still fenced off, and gaping holes have remained unfilled since the earthquake.

In nearby Watsonville, many residents who work in the fields or other low-paying jobs are still struggling to find temporary housing. Dozens of people have been living in motels since the earthquake, and the population in the area's homeless shelters has doubled.

The rebuilding process has been delayed, some residents say, because of inaction and ineptitude by various governmental agencies. They claim that county building permits were issued too slowly, particularly in the mountain areas; that federal officials have made it

too difficult for the poor to obtain temporary housing assistance; and that the reconstruction of downtown Santa Cruz should be further along.

In downtown Santa Cruz the Pacific Garden Mall, a six-block strip of small shops and quaint turn-of-the-century buildings, symbolized the eccentric and eclectic nature of the city. Before the earthquake, the open-air mall was filled with a mlang of students, transients and button-down businessmen, and the stores sold everything from new-age clothing with crystals imbedded in the fabric to organic pet food.

But the earthquake destroyed more than a third of the downtown business district, including many

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historic buildings, and badly damaged numerous others. Today, this once distinctive area is barely recognizable. With its rubble-strewn lots and condemned buildings, much of the mall has remained unchanged since the earthquake.

Almost 100 of the cities' more than 600 businesses never reopened after the earthquake. Other merchants, whose buildings were badly damaged or destroyed, moved to the Phoenix Pavilions, a collection of large, gray, tent-like structures dotting a strip of parking lots behind the mall. During last year's Christmas season, most businesses reported record sales, because Bay Area shoppers wanted to support merchants who suffered losses in the quake.

But the novelty has worn thin. Sales are off by more than half, many merchants said, and most have no idea when they can relocate.

For a city of 50,000, Santa Cruz suffered devastating losses in the earthquake — damage in the city was estimated at more than \$100 million. And the city continues to have financial problems. Because of all the businesses that were destroyed, Santa Cruz has lost more than \$1 million in sales and property tax revenue this year. And if a proposed sales tax hike does not pass in an upcoming countywide election, Wormhoudt said, "we'll be in trouble ... I don't know what we'll do."

Before the earthquake, affordable housing in Watsonville, which had a vacancy rate of less than 1 percent, was a serious problem.

After the earthquake it was a disaster. Thousands of people were suddenly homeless and city budget officials had to dip into a capital reserve fund to keep the city of 30,000 running. Many of the newly homeless in Watsonville were Latino farm workers or low wage earners who had previously crowded into small apartments, sometimes two and three families to a unit.

Although many residents eventually obtained funds for housing from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or moved into one of the agencies' temporary mobile home parks, hundreds of families didn't qualify. Because they shared housing with a number of other families or lived in illegal units, such as converted garages, they did not have rent receipts or other documentation needed to obtain housing assistance.

Even those who were able to obtain federal assistance will have a difficult time finding permanent housing when the programs expire this spring. The city has agreed to build more than 200 low-income housing units, but this will only accommodate a fraction of the temporarily homeless.

Almost 10 percent of the city's housing stock was destroyed in the earthquake, much of it where the city's poor lived. But now, as these apartments are being rebuilt, many landlords are taking advantage of the housing shortage and almost doubling their rents.