



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

This damaged house is like many others which may be eligible for an owner-risk building permit.

EARTHQUAKE '89 - Summit rebuilding

County relents, will issue permits in mountain areas

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SANTA CRUZ — Mountain residents with serious home damage will be able to apply for permits to fix their homes — at their own risk of financial loss — as long as geologic studies show there is no immediate threat to human life, the county Board of Supervisors decided Tuesday.

Geologists have warned that the Summit area could face more damage from slides during this winter's rainy season.

The supervisors asked Planning Director Dianne Guzman to consider repealing a county policy that "arbitrarily" forbade repair of homes with more than 50-percent damage from the Oct. 17 earthquake, but allowed repair of those with less than 50-percent damage.

Guzman's office was given permission to start taking repair permit applications from the affected homeowners this week. Although the supervisors' decision was a recommendation and not a mandate, board Chairman Gary Patton said it was "highly persuasive," and the department would likely yield. Guzman will report back to supervisors Tuesday on the change.

Under the new rules authored by supervisors Jan Beautz and Fred Keeley, repair permits may be issued if a home site "shows no indication of significant geologic hazards."

But if geologic hazards are evident, such as cracks and fissures, the property must be studied by a geologist, and may require a soils or geology report by a private consultant. Guzman said the Planning Department has a list of approved geologists for homeowners.

Any homes with greater than 25-

percent damage will require plans for the permit, the supervisors agreed.

In community meetings with supervisors, mountain homeowners had expressed frustration that they couldn't make their own decision whether to take the financial risk of fixing their homes in high-damage neighborhoods, especially before winter rains wreak further damage.

The 50-percent-damage rule had applied to homes in a wide swath of the Santa Cruz Mountains, from north of Boulder Creek to south of Corralitos.

That entire mountain region has been designated the "Area of Highest Damage." And within that large area, authorities have pinpointed pockets of even higher damage, called "Areas of Critical Concern," which have suffered severe cracks and fissures that could signal the reactivation of giant, ancient landslide masses.

Geologists fear that hundreds of homes — some damaged and others untouched by the Oct. 17 earthquake — could be doomed if those landslides start to move when rain washes into the cracked earth.

The county is preparing to have the Army Corps of Engineers do a \$600,000 geological study to see if certain neighborhoods are threatened by landslides, but it could take one or two years — through at least one wet winter — before results will be known.

In the meantime, county supervisors agreed with frustrated mountain homeowners that it wasn't fair of the county to keep people from repairing their homes.

Supervisors emphasized, however, that allowing repairs is by no means an endorsement that the land is safe and sound.

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Santa Cruz Mountains have "demonstrated they are a dangerous area," said Aptos Supervisor Robert Levy.

Just how dangerous they are will not be known for a long time.

If geological studies eventually show that the property is doomed to slide, entire neighborhoods could be ordered evacuated, and the homeowners who make investments in their land now must know they could lose it, supervisors agreed.

Supervisors also said they might place a moratorium on all new development in the affected mountain areas. "I would support a hold on

new construction," said Patton. Supervisors have time to make up their minds on this point, since the Planning Department is not currently handling regular business while it responds to the earthquake repair applications and inspections.

The board also moved to protect future homebuyers from naively buying mountain property that is endangered or was badly damaged in the quake.

Patton said he is concerned that the repair rule could be "used in an unfair way by people, not to protect their investment" and repair their home for their own residence, but

to quickly fix up their home and present it to "unsuspecting buyers" as a home that "came through the quake OK."

Patton said the county should do all it can to make sure that buyers aren't duped.

He said the county should post notices far and wide, including to all owners of homes in the high-damage area and to potential home buyers, that the geologic safety of the land is still unknown.

As homes are repaired, the damage and repair work and future notations about the geologic hazards will be recorded in property records.