

Officials hope to ease quake repairs

By Lee Quarnstrom
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With the second anniversary of the Loma Prieta earthquake just four weeks away, local officials are hoping to cut costs as well as red tape for those rural landowners who have not yet begun fixing or rebuilding their Santa Cruz Mountain homes.

Santa Cruz County supervisors have asked the American Red Cross to cover permit-processing costs, which average \$2,000 per permit, for the estimated 100 homeowners who have not yet applied for planning department permission to start repairs or to

rebuild.

County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello said some mountain residents postponed applying for rebuilding permits pending the outcome of a long-term U.S. Army Corps of Engineers geologic study of the area.

In a recent preliminary report, Army engineers said the danger to human life from geologic hazards such as landslides was relatively low in the summit area — a switch from earlier geological studies that pointed to the potential for massive landslides in the mountains.

With preliminary results of the Army engineers' study in hand, supervisors moved recently to rescind a requirement that permit applicants sign waivers protecting the county against costs of damage caused by geologic incidents. That waiver system had not sat well with mountain residents, who said it gave the county expanded powers to condemn property in the so-called geologic hazard zone.

Hank Meyer, the president of the Villa Del Monte homeowners' organization, said that no one is really certain how many people have yet to apply for rebuilding permits.

"I'd expect the numbers to be in excess of 100," he said. "I don't know if anybody really knows the number."

He said the supervisors' action "will be quite a help to quite a few people" who live in the summit area.

By easing the waiver requirement, supervisors made permits for repairing or reconstructing quake-damaged homes no different than any other building permit in the county.

But the residents who waited for the study to determine whether it made sense to re-

See PERMITS, Page 2B

Officials aim to cut costs, red tape for quake repairs

■ PERMITS

from Page 1B

build or whether they would be allowed to rebuild missed out on a federally funded permit program for quake victims.

Until June 30, all quake victims could apply for permits at no cost. That program, which saw about 17,000 permits issued for repairs and rebuilding throughout Santa Cruz County since the Oct. 17, 1989 temblor, was financed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the state Office of Emergency Services.

Because that program has expired, Mauriello told the board of

supervisors this week, the county should seek funds to defray permit processing costs for the homeowners who waited for the study.

At her suggestion, supervisors agreed to ask the American Red Cross to provide financial assistance to cover permit costs for summit-area property owners.

The emergency services director for the Santa Cruz County chapter of the Red Cross said her agency has been working with permit applicants on a case-by-case basis.

"I can't speak for the earthquake relief board," said Julie Fletcher-Tighe, "but we have been providing financial aid to people based on what they can and can't afford."

County Planning Director Dianne Guzman said Wednesday the county was trying to ease the financial burden for beleaguered property owners while not depleting the county budget.

"One hundred permits at \$2,000 apiece," noted the planning chief, "would cost \$200,000. We're hoping the Red Cross can help these folks pay. We certainly cannot find that kind of money in our departmental budget."

Mauriello said the matter, which has been discussed "at the staff level" between the county and the Red Cross, will be on Tuesday's agenda of the American Red Cross Northern California Earthquake Relief Board.