



The building at 53 Union St.: will it be the first to go?

Union Street evictions may be first in a series

By ANN CONY

The two-story apartment building at 53 Union St., condemned by the city, is nearly vacant now.

And this condemnation may be the first of a series in Watsonville, due to the recent enactment of a state law which requires all apartments and rooming houses of two or more stories to conform with the building code or be vacated by Jan. 1, 1982.

Assistant Fire Chief Dave Williams said Friday that the city is now working on a plan for inspection of substandard housing throughout the city. It is Williams' estimate that three to four hundred people are living in "unfit" housing, as defined by the new law.

Furthermore, he added, that number does not reflect the many other people living in substandard one-story housing, which isn't covered by the new law.

The 100 or so people who lived in the 24 rooms at 53 Union St. have until Monday to leave, but may get an extension. Williams said the state allows a 15-day grace period beyond the 30-day eviction period, so any remaining tenants won't be forcibly ejected when the city red-tags the building Monday.

Friday afternoon a couple of families were in the process of moving, but there were still a dozen tenants, none of whom know where they'll go next.

"They've got to give us time to find

a house," said Maria Castillo, who has been sharing a \$250-a-month room with two other people.

Most of the people who are left have no friends and no family to turn to for help. Most of those who have moved have moved in with friends or doubled up with each other in new living quarters.

Rod Pulley, director of the county Housing Authority, took matters into his own hands after the building was found unsafe and offered to house families at the Buena Vista labor camp, about five miles from town.

However, it appears only one family has accepted the offer to move to the labor camp. "They're not flocking to us," Pulley noted. "They want to be where they are, but in a nicer place. They know the area around there, their friends are there and they're near their work."

One alternative available to the displaced people is a housing subsidy offered through the federal government. "Section 8," as it is known, enables low-income families, senior citizens and disabled people to live in decent housing for which they pay one-fourth of their income in rent.

"We're hoping we'll be able to house them under Section 8," Pulley said, "but they will have to find the housing themselves."

Carlos Rico, also with the Housing Authority, issued a plea a few weeks ago for people in the community with possible housing solutions to give him a call.

As of Thursday he'd received one offer — from a woman who had a \$400 house for rent. "If these people could afford \$400 rent, they wouldn't be living in those conditions," Rico said.

Rico added that he was particularly worried about the elderly Filipino men who live at 53 Union. "They're a forgotten lot," he said. "They're really in a quandary."

As for the other families, "a lot of them are doubling up. We really haven't solved anything. There's a lot more substandard housing like this. This is just the beginning."

Supervisor Chris Matthews is also concerned about the situation. "This is an indication of a much larger problem," he said. "There is no emergency housing in this county for anyone. The city and county should sit down, discuss this and try to rectify the problem."

Dave Singleton, director of the county's Social Services Department, concurred, saying "the county doesn't have any facilities to put people up. We will attempt to help people find housing, though." But the people must ask for help, and "the problem is that our resource list for available housing is pretty much a conventional list," drawn primarily from the classified ads in local papers.

Part of the problem seems to be that the residents of 53 Union St. who need help the most don't know how to ask for it.