

Life is a dilemma for those in Beach Flats

Families try to pick up the pieces

By HERON MARQUEZ ESTRADA

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — For the Fire Department the danger and the worry was over that same day; for the news media the incident was all but forgotten the day after.

But for Jesus and Alicia Bracamontes, their four children, and six other families, the Feb. 16 fire at The Dolphin apartments is a danger they cannot forget, a worry that is ever present.

For the past two weeks the Bracamontes, and the others who lived in the burned-out units, have ridden an emotional roller coaster — alternately happy to be alive, then painfully aware of the losses they have suffered, such as the only picture Alicia had of her father.

The fire occurred in the Beach Flats, an area characterized by generally undesirable housing but which, not coincidentally, attracts many low-income families such as the Bracamontes to places like The Dolphin.

Alicia said her family, like the others, was paying about \$320 a month for a studio where, in order to give the illusion of



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Alicia Bracamontes with her children, Berta and Veronica, and Teofilia Verar with her son, Miguel

Critics call it an eyesore residents call it home

By JOAN RAYMOND

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — In the sleepier days of Santa Cruz, the motel courts of Beach Flats catered to tourists from the San Francisco Bay Area who rented the side-by-side cabins by the week for family summer vacations near the Boardwalk.

With their thin walls, kitchenettes and small bedrooms, the motel apartments were suited to short stays in warm weather.

Now, the apartments are permanent housing for the city's poorest residents, and its Mexican community.

Like the riverside summer resorts of the San Lorenzo Valley, Beach Flats became year-round housing as more and more people moved to Santa Cruz County.

The increased population and accompanying housing crunch stiffened competition for all rental units, particularly the cheapest.

In the Valley, the influx of year-round residents into the summer cabins put a strain on the mountain ecology, partly by the constant use of old, unrepaired septic tanks that cause pollution problems.

There are no septic tanks in Beach Flats, but there are plumbing, heating, sanitation and other problems associated with overcrowding. The plumbing is old, and sometimes not working at all.

"Our bathroom doesn't even flush sometimes. The city says it's the owner's fault. The owner says it's the city's," said Ludi Guerrero, a staff member at La Familia Crisis Center in the heart of Beach Flats.

La Familia (The Family) is a city and Community Action Board-funded project trying to make ends meet in its job of giving emergency food vouchers, crisis

counseling, health care, pregnancy screening, legal advice, youth and family counseling, English translation and other services to Beach Flats residents.

The logo for La Familia is a heart with wings.

Guerrero, the daughter of a large Mexican migrant farmworker family, does not live in Beach Flats, but she works there with the people and knows their strengths and problems.

She and other English-speaking La Familia staff members are sometimes the only link between the Spanish-speaking residents and mainstream America.

The location of Beach Flats, so close to the ocean — combined with the rundown rental units there — make it a target for redevelopment.

Tourist promoters consider it an eyesore. Tourists must drive through Beach Flats to visit the Boardwalk and wharf.

A proposal to build a major hotel at the nearby La Bahia Apartments — another old resort-motel-turned-apartments — worries Beach Flats residents.

They worry pressure for development will march from the La Bahia property into Beach Flats. They worry the residential zoning of Beach Flats is not enough to protect their homes from the bulldozer.

Guerrero doesn't romanticize the nature of the housing. She agrees there are cockroaches and rats and needed repairs.

There isn't enough room.

She cited the case of one family crammed into a one-bedroom apartment. The mother sleeps with her baby on a twin bed. The father sleeps on the kitchen floor. Two toddlers sleep on blankets on the bedroom floor. Another kindergarten-aged child sleeps on a loveseat.

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REFERENCE

Homeless-

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dren, were displaced from their homes. Most of them are Mexicans who speak little or no English, the men working at jobs where they get minimum wage, or slightly above, while the women look after the children.

The displaced find themselves not only in a foreign country, but also suddenly thrown into a market where housing is at a premium, where what is available is either out of their price range or hindered by restrictions on children or number of occupants.

Thus far, only a family of three has found a place to live. The rest, like the Bracamontes, continue to look.

Alicia, in Spanish, said her family has looked at places, when they can be found, where rents for an apartment run to \$500 per month or more.

"We hope to God that we can obtain (money) with which to pay the rent," she said while sitting at the La Familia Center on Leibrandt Avenue, a few doors away from where the fire took place.

Guerrero said she has called "just about every place in Santa Cruz" without any luck.

"The response is always the same, 'Oh we don't have any housing,' 'Oh, we rented it yesterday,'" Guerrero said.

She adds that some of the families face the possibility of having to move out of Santa Cruz if they are unable to find affordable housing, which has many upset because their jobs are here in the city.

Guerrero said the center has almost received sufficient contributions in terms of furnishing to help the families recoup their losses. What has not been found yet is some place to use those furnishings.

"We don't really need clothing; what we need is housing," Guerrero said, adding that through donations to the Red Cross and through other means the families will somehow come up with the needed deposits.

"The trick is to find some place to give those deposits," said Teofila Verar, a 25-year-old mother of four boys whose family also lived at The Dolphin.

Teofila considers herself one of the luckier ones, she says, because her family has enough to rent a home, just no home to rent. Also, some of her furnishings were saved, but they reek of smoke and remain so water-logged as to be virtually ruined.

But the blaze at 136 Leibrandt Ave. did more than destroy in minutes possessions that had taken years to accumulate. It also destroyed the peoples' lifestyles, their nucleus, and whatever security they had.

The patterned life that many of them had acquired was suddenly chaotic.

The nomadic existence the families are living (three temporary residences in two weeks) makes even the simplest tasks difficult because of the inability to plan more than a day ahead.

Just getting the children off to school is a trying experience for Alicia, 26, whose children are all 10 years of age or younger. The first one has to be at the bus stop at 7:30 in the morning, the next one at 8, the third at 9. The first child then has to be picked up at 12:45 that afternoon. All the while she has to look after her 18-month old son.

She says her worries are exacerbated by the fact her oldest child is mentally handicapped and must be looked after constantly.

Forced to confront the consequences of the disaster, the seven families are now faced with the basic, but difficult, questions: Where shall we live? How shall we eat? How shall we pay for it all?

The Bracamontes and the rest of the group have been greatly aided, and in a real sense saved, by the American Red Cross, which began a rescue operation almost simultaneously with the Fire Department's.

The Red Cross continues to house the families at a beach motel, after first putting them up overnight in a local church and then a hotel for several days.

Meredith Nicoles, a volunteer caseworker with the Red Cross, estimates it may eventually cost the organization about \$10,000 to house, feed, clothe and otherwise maintain the families until they find a place to live.

"If you can stress anything of importance it is housing," Nicoles said. "The entire city and county (housing market) is tight and scarce as hen's teeth."

Although Nicoles said the Red Cross won't pull its financial base out from under the families, it still, as always, is looking for contributions to help defray the costs.

Especially, Nicoles said, since the Red Cross has already exceeded its disaster relief budget for the year.

Residents call it home

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The rent is \$350 per month.

Two-bedroom units rent for an average of \$500 monthly, she said.

Despite the problems, there is a sense of community in Beach Flats that is not often seen in other neighborhoods. The housing is so tight, the children can't help but play together. The yards all spill into each other. The sidewalks are part of the yards. The residents congregate on the sidewalks to talk.

"It's a real community where people help each other. The families are very close, something I don't see much in Anglo homes," Guerrero commented.

She believes crime and drug problems there are exaggerated in the press, and are not the blame of the Mexican families. "The parents are struggling against bad influences on their children, just like everybody else."

Guerrero doesn't have an answer to the housing problems. But she says a house in Beach Flats is better than no house at all.

"Most residents have lived here a long time. Even when they move from one address, they stay in the area," she said.

They have come from Mexico to work, she said. They work in restaurant kitchens, cleaning bathrooms, in laundry rooms, on assembly lines and in the fields.

"They come here to work. That's really what they want to do. Those who stay don't have anything to go back to (in Mexico)."

At almost every meeting of the City Council, there is talk about the need for "affordable" housing (subsidized housing

for "low- and moderate-income" residents.)

Voters passed a measure in 1979 (Measure O) requiring 15 percent of all new dwellings to be "affordable." Developers are required to build a certain number of "affordable" units as a condition of approval for new projects. Developers must pay about the equivalent of two months rent for each eligible low- or moderate-income tenant displaced by new construction.

Another regulation requires the rebuilding of "affordable" housing to replace bulldozed units for the needy.

But, "affordable" housing means next to nothing for the Mexican community of Beach Flats, said Guerrero.

The residents are too poor to meet minimum financing requirements, she said.

She cited the case of husband and wife with four children. The husband makes \$610 per month doing custodial work. They receive no Medi-Cal.

Also, she said, the residents are hesitant — even frightened — to answer questions on government forms that would make them eligible for assistance, but jeopardize obtaining a "green card" — documentation needed to stay and work in America.

"Those displaced from their houses should have priority (for replacement housing) without having to answer so many questions," Guerrero commented.

Acceptance of Medi-Cal can jeopardize the green card. "They have to prove they won't be indigent.

"After getting the green card, they feel

relieved. They can work openly."

She said one resident told her he feels like a different person in this country, because he is wary and paranoid. In Mexico, he told her, "I'm outgoing and happy."

Mothers with sick children are afraid to ask for medical help lest their green card be jeopardized, added Guerrero.

Guerrero said, "They don't have anywhere to go. The mothers will use teas and home remedies until their children get well. Only as a last resort will they go to Medi-Cal."

She said there are a few single mothers who receive welfare through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. "These women know they will never get their (immigration) papers. The government sees any help it can give as being dependent."

Guerrero was six at the time her family migrated to Texas and California to work in the fields. She said the people in Texas were more friendly than in California.

"We always wanted to go back, but we never had enough money."

Guerrero has no solution to the housing problem.

She is not confident about stopping the bulldozer.

"I know someday it is going to happen. But I wish there was a place where these people could go without making them feel bad, without (government) acting as if it is doing them a big service, if it finds housing for them.

"It's their right to have housing."