

Census-1990

A-4—Santa Cruz Sentinel — Thursday, March 22, 1990

No door-to-door census in Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — Regional Census Bureau Director John Reeder dashed any hopes local officials had of getting a door-to-door count in Watsonville, saying Wednesday that the mail-out, mail-in census form is the "best system" there is.

Reeder met with officials from Watsonville, Salinas and the state to discuss the special Census efforts in areas affected by the Oct. 17 earthquake.

"We can't stop the mail census here ... and we wouldn't want to," Reeder said. He said studies indicate it's the best system around.

Short of a door-to-door count, community leaders told Reeder the census will miss a large part of the population.

"Our problem will not be in getting people to fill out the forms," Raymundo Vigil, Watsonville's Complete Count Census coordinator said. "The problem will be to get that census form in people's hands."

Vigil suggested the Census Bureau give the Complete Count Committee forms to help people fill out. "Don't provide us with the materials, and we will have an undercount," he said.

Reeder said the Census Bureau couldn't give out forms to the committee.

"You missed the point of the comments made at this meeting," said Anna Rodrigues of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Besides the fear factor in the Hispanic community, Rodrigues said, people won't understand the form when it arrives, or know what to do with it.

Watsonville Mayor Todd McFarren said people who are illiterate will take one look at the form, "realize it's not a bill and not a check and throw it away."

Despite all the criticism heaped on the system, Reeder maintained it has proved to be the best overall method of counting the public.

Reeder said the mail system is checked several times to ensure that all addresses are contacted. In 1980, when the Census Bureau used the mail system extensively, about 83 percent of the households nationwide responded. Locally, the response was only 71 percent, he said.

That left the bureau with a small percentage of homes to contact, saving a substantial amount in labor costs, Reeder said.

If a form isn't returned from a known address, Reeder said census takers return to the home at least four times at different hours to try to reach a family member.

Critics of the effort pointed out that because of the earthquake, hundreds of families are living at federal emergency trailers, motels or with relatives. A form mailed to a non-existent address won't do the census much good, they said.

Reeder said the census will ask displaced residents to list their damaged homes as their "usual resi-

dences."

If people are doubled up in homes, the census will ask them to call a toll-free 800 number for advice about how to fill out the forms, or to fill out a questionnaire that will be released in June to catch any people who weren't counted in April, Reeder said.

Reeder said his bureau is aware of the 125 federal emergency trailers in the South County area, and plans to contact the trailer parks in the first count.

Despite some fundamental differences, agreement was reached on a couple of key points.

McFarren won an assurance from Reeder that the census will try to reach displaced residents in the Motel Voucher Program.

The mayor also asked that the Census Bureau

provide the local Complete Count Committee with a ballpark figure on how many non-responses to the mail-in system it gets.

Reeder said he'd check to see what kind of information can be released without violating confidentiality rules.

Reeder admitted the census doesn't reach everyone it attempts to.

"Our problem is not in getting the number of housing units," Reeder said. "Where we miss is in the number of people in the household."

The census will cross check households with seven or more people, he said. But, Reeder said, "No mechanism will find all those people in illegal conversions."