

Low-cost housing OK'd

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

Watsonville voters gave overwhelming approval Tuesday to a referendum aimed at providing more low-cost housing in the city.

Passage of Measure J brought joy and relief to proponents of the referendum who had seen similar measures defeated in 1977 and 1978.

Approving the latest measure were 59.9 percent of the voters (3,216), compared to 40 percent (2,149) against the referendum.

In May 1977, a low-cost housing referendum lost by 93 votes; in June 1978 a similar measure was defeated with an 82-vote margin.

"I'm delighted," said City Councilwoman Betty Murphy this morning. "Three times must be a charm."

The measure doesn't necessarily mean that low-cost housing will be built. It simply allows the Santa Cruz Housing Authority to build as many as 80 housing units if federal or state money can be found. Under the measure, the units must be

distributed throughout the city, with no more than 16 units per site.

Mrs. Murphy, who wrote the ballot argument in favor of Measure J, said it was ironic that passage of the subsidized-housing referendum came at a time when voters appeared to be growing more conservative.

She surmised, however, that city residents were becoming increasingly aware of the need to replace the city's substandard housing.

Mrs. Murphy pointed to the publicity this year over eviction of residents of a ramshackle boarding house at 53 Union Street. (The two-story structure was closed after city and county officials "redtagged" it for health and safety violations.)

Also the focus of public attention, she noted, was the plight of the dozen families who live in a substandard apartment complex in an alley off Riverside Drive. City Hall, in a harbinger to its state-mandated housing code enforcement program, had started to take action aimed at

evicting the families. But the City Council was forced to call a halt to the procedures after residents complained they had no place to move to.

Another reason for passage of the measure, she said, was the support it received from establishment-type organizations such as the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce.

She said much of the credit for promoting public awareness of the substandard housing problem should go to Carlos Rico, a Watsonville grocery store owner who serves on the Housing Authority board.

Rico, she said, had given numerous influential people tours of the hidden side of Watsonville — the shack-like, unsanitary housing that winds through the city's back alleys.

In turn, Rico this morning credited City Council members such as Mrs. Murphy for pushing through the measure.

"We also had a lot of community support," he said.

Rico said he couldn't predict when new housing would be built. Housing Authority officials, he added, are unsure what the new Republican administration's policy toward subsidized housing will be.

"There's no (federal) money in sight right now," he said, adding that he hoped some funding might become available through programs run by the state.

One of the biggest obstacles to getting a low-cost housing referendum passed, said Mrs. Murphy and Rico, had been convincing voters that the measure would not result in the construction of massive new housing projects such as the Green Valley Apartments.

"The project (Green Valley) sticks in people's minds," Rico said. "But it wasn't built by the Housing Authority."

Mrs. Murphy said she continually reminded residents that Green Valley was built outside the city limits through private, not governmental, efforts.