

Migrant housing dilemma

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The plight of migrant farm workers — forced to live in cars and crowded, unheated homes with cardboard walls and leaking ceilings — was described to a panel of state housing officials in Watsonville last night.

The officials, from the state Department of Housing and Community Development, recorded the testimony for a report they'll give the state Legislature next February.

The stories they heard were not pretty. Speakers said that the few migrant-labor camps here are overcrowded and that all but one are unsanitary and dangerous.

Though it's common knowledge that most migrant housing violates safety and sanitation codes, speakers said, few violations are reported to city and county inspectors, at least partly because the migrant workers and their advocates know the laborers have nowhere else to go.

The speakers also said they perceived an increasing tendency for farm workers to set up a home base in the Watsonville area. The new federal immigration law, which will enable many workers to establish legal residency, is expected to increase this trend.

Many speakers urged the state to convey an urgent plea for funds to the Legislature, contrasting the state's billion-dollar reserve to the squalor of the migrant labor camps.

Rebecca Garcia, a teacher in the Pajaro Valley school district, said unsafe and crowded living conditions prevent many migrant children from studying properly. Homelessness keeps others from attending school regularly.

Barbara Garcia, of the health clinic Salud Para La Gente, said that migrant workers in the area have become poisoned by pesticides because their housing is too close to fields where spraying occurs.

Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith described the pressure he works under. On the one hand, he must make sure the city's low-income housing doesn't contain life-threatening safety violations. He's encountered a single-family home housing 29 people, workers living on the roofs of commercial buildings on lower Main Street and a group of people living in an unheated home, who had cut out

part of the floor to create a fire pit.

On the other hand, he said he is acutely aware that if he condemns a home, garage or out-building as unsafe, its residents may end up on the street.

Several speakers urged the state to help fund several more labor camps such as the Buena Vista camp, which was built with state money and is operated by the county Housing Authority.

Chuck Barr, a representative of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, recommended the next state-subsidized housing project be built closer to town than Buena Vista so that the project would be able to benefit from existing sewers and the tenants would be closer to city services.

Some of the speakers suggested that the Buena Vista complex, be open year-round. It is now closed six months of because its sewage-treatment facilities are inadequate.

Advocates of this proposal included Watsonville City Councilman Vido Deretich, who is running for re-election, and Sister Susan Olsen, of the Pajaro Valley Shelter for Women and Children.

Jose Ruiz, director of the non-profit group called TECHO, observed that the county has not been able to take advantage of funds provided through the Farm Labor Housing Program because the county's growth-control ordinance (Measure J) restricts the construction of high-density housing in the county's rural areas, while the state won't allocate funds for

Construction in urban areas.

Mary James, executive director of the county Housing Authority, said 5,000 families are already on a waiting list for housing offered through the county's affordable-housing program. When seasonal workers arrive, they compete for shelter with these 5,000 families. James estimated nine out of ten migrant farm workers can't find decent housing in Santa Cruz County.

One ray of hope came when it was mentioned that the state has created a fund to help pay for the rehabilitation of privately run labor camps. Last year, \$1 million was set aside for that purpose, but the state still hasn't devised regulations for distributing the money.

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