

Crisis housing rescued

Earthquake - Watsonville Rebuilding Panetta convinces White House, FEMA to allow trailers

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WATSONVILLE — Quake homeless here will be getting emergency trailers after all.

The trailers will be coming because Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, convinced the Bush administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to change their mind. Earlier Wednesday, FEMA had announced it would not send 100 trailers to Watsonville, a decision met with frustration and anger by city officials.

FEMA instead proposed to give quake homeless a monthly rent stipend of \$960.

But city officials quickly pointed out that housing is hard to come by since the Oct. 17 earthquake.

FEMA representatives told city officials they refused to send the trailers because they believed the 1,200 left homeless in Watsonville could find housing in the area.

But Panetta stepped in late Wednesday and telephoned the White House and FEMA headquarters to get the change in plans.

"This temporary housing is vital if we're going to get people out of tents and into shelters," Panetta said. "The cold weather is approaching and the current

situation is no longer tolerable."

Panetta said it was "urgent to begin with these 100 units. I believe more will be needed and I will do whatever is necessary to ensure FEMA provides additional housing."

He added that in the long run, the government needs to ensure adequate housing at reasonable cost.

In the wake of the earthquake, hundreds of families set up makeshift tent cities throughout the city. Most of them have moved to Red Cross shelters, but about 150 families remain under tents at Callaghan Park.

The Callaghan Park campers have

vowed not to move until they get better shelter in the form of trailers.

The trailers will be available for use in Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties. Families will be able to stay in them for up to 18 months, provided they can convince FEMA they can't find alternative housing.

Just minutes before Panetta's announcement was made public, City Manager John Radin told the City Council that FEMA officials refused their request for the trailers.

"There are no plans to bring in the



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Rep. Leon Panetta

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trailers," said Radin. "FEMA made its decision this afternoon."

Planning Director Maureen Owens said FEMA officials told her Wednesday that they refused to send the trailers because they believed there was available housing in tri-county area.

A FEMA spokesman, Michael Allen, said late Wednesday night that the decision to send the trailers is a "safeguard" against the possibility that the emergency agency's estimate of available housing in Santa Cruz County is low.

The trailers will be shipped from a storage yard in Palo Pinto, Texas, he said.

FEMA had a "bad experience" in South Carolina following Hurricane Hugo.

Allen said later that the agency

sent 152 trailers to South Carolina, but that only 10 have been used by families so far.

In place of housing, FEMA officials said they would give up to \$960 a month to each family so they could spend it wherever they chose.

But city officials scoffed at that idea.

"We just don't have the housing," said Owens.

The earthquake exacerbated an already critical housing crisis in the Pajaro Valley, where multiple families often occupy one home. The Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments estimates Watsonville is more than 1,000 houses short of what it needs to meet the housing need.

"No one is more frustrated than I," said Owens. "I personally believe what FEMA is doing is seeing if people don't go away."

But with the turn of events, city officials were again smiling.

"I'm delighted," said Mayor Betty Murphy. "I'm so happy our congressman was able to accomplish this in such a short time."

"I want those people out of the tents by the time the rain comes," Murphy said.

The city has already identified several sites where it wants to place the trailers that FEMA has available. Owens said that 30 trailers are tentatively scheduled to be placed behind the county annex on Freedom Boulevard. Other sites include the fairgrounds and Pinto Lake park.

The city got a piece of good news on another front. The Building Industry Association presented the city with a \$25,000 check for its disaster relief fund, which is designed to provide long-term housing.