

# Cruz/Monterey

EARTHQUAKE '89 - Watsonville

## Quake reopens mobile home debate

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Special to the Mercury News

Many of the 300 Watsonville area mobile homes that fell to the ground during the Oct. 17 earthquake are being returned to foundations that some state housing inspectors believe are inadequate and should be outlawed.

Widespread damage to the homes of Watsonville's mobile home residents, many of them elderly, has added new urgency to an old debate in the industry about the safety of steel pier foundations vs. cement block foundations.

Travis Pitts, deputy director of the state

### Some contend pier foundations are inadequate

Department of Housing and Community Development, said there has been a quiet controversy within his agency for years over allowing the pier foundations.

"It has been the allegation of my inspectors that those on cement blocks fare better than those on piers," said Pitts, who oversees the division of codes and standards. "That opinion has been floating around our division unsubstantiated for 10

or 11 years."

The inspectors who support cement block foundations base their conclusion on observation of damage inflicted by earthquakes in Santa Barbara, Livermore and Morgan Hill.

The Department of Housing and Community Development has the authority to require cement block foundations for mobile homes but, despite the opinion of

many inspectors, Pitts has been reluctant to initiate the change until he has statistical evidence.

"I'm being besieged by the manufacturers of steel piers and, if I'm going to go to a hearing, I'm going to have data," Pitts said. "I'm no fool."

The owner of Meadow Manor Mobile Home Park off Freedom Boulevard in

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# Post-quake data may shed light on mobile home dispute

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north Watsonville already is convinced his residents were spared major damage by his decision two decades ago to emphasize cement block foundations.

In 1970, Meadow Manor owner John Adams hauled an impressive stockpile of 40,000 cement blocks to a yard next to the park. Since then, those blocks were used for the foundations of more than 200 homes in the park. Of those homes, only two or three were knocked to the ground during the earthquake and, Adams said, "We still haven't figured out why those

fell."

A total of 13 or 14 homes were knocked from their foundations at the 250-space Meadow Manor and Adams has no doubt about why those homes and hundreds of others in Watsonville fell: "They were on piers instead of blocks."

Management representatives from other Watsonville mobile home parks, however, believe the earthquake's erratic pattern of destruction had little to do with the variety of foundations.

"We have cement blocks, we have steel jacks, we have some with earthquake braces and some without," said June

McClintock, co-manager of the Rancho Cerritos Park, where 90 percent of the homes were knocked to the ground.

McClintock has not seen any correlation between the type of foundation and the extent of damage, and she believes foundations have little to do with the pattern of destruction that left Rancho Cerritos and Pinto Lake Park in a shambles while barely touching Meadow Manor and Portola Heights.

"I think it was the way the earthquake hit," said McClintock. "I think it was the location of the parks."

Others in the industry believe the key to

a sound foundation is earthquake bracing. "I have been into almost every park in the county and I have yet to see a mobile home in Santa Cruz County with earthquake bracing that went down," said Bill Keaton, an estimator with Kaltenberg's Mobile Home Service. Keaton said the firm recommends the pier system, will install cement block if requested, but urges the use of earthquake bracing.

The debate over foundations is more than an academic exercise because, as mobile homes throughout the Watsonville area are repaired, state inspectors have no choice but to allow the use of foundations

that many of the inspectors believe are faulty.

"The state is allowing them to put the homes back up the way they were," said Adams. "That law should be changed — and fast."

The Oct. 17 earthquake is being used as a test case, with state inspectors required for the first time to complete forms on every mobile home inspection. The purpose of the form is to collect data about types of foundations that failed. Pitts expects to have the data in 30 to 60 days.

If the statistics confirm the need for revised regulations, public hearings will then be scheduled.