

Watsonville seeks census recount

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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville is standing up and demanding to be recounted — and hundreds of thousands of dollars are at stake.

City officials and Latino advocacy groups have claimed for more than two years that the city's population figure as determined by the 1990 census, 31,009, is off by as many as several thousand people. They say this is largely because many people were displaced by the 1989 earthquake at the time the census was taken in April 1990.

The city gets about \$163.50 yearly in state and federal money per person, according to Dicksie Allen, an associate city planner who has worked on the census problem since 1990. Allen says the city can prove the Census Bureau missed 565 dwellings, and she thinks the total of uncounted people is much higher.

The government funds on the basis of 3.27 persons per household. Counting the 565 uncounted households would mean \$92,375.50 per year more for the city and Allen says Watsonville could be entitled to much more than that.

"That's the absolute minimum I'd be willing to accept," Allen said. "We're also asking that this be made retroactive to 1990, so we'd get the money for every year since 1990."

But Steve Alnwick of the Census Bureau's regional office in Los Angeles said the bureau has made adjustments in response to complaints by the city, and is satisfied with its count.

"It appears to me that all of the census procedures have been followed," he said. "They took part in the system, and we did what we should have done. That's long resolved."

Allen, however, cites other evidence of an undercount.

According to Pajaro Valley Unified School District statistics, its enrollment decline from October 1989 to January 1990 was 3.5 percent — more than double those of the previous and subsequent Octo-

A city planner says the Census Bureau missed counting the inhabitants of at least 565 dwellings.

ber-to-January periods.

Because of the quake, families with ties to Mexico may have gone there — many do anyway for several weeks around Christmas — and some might not have returned by April.

Moreover, a door-to-door survey last month by Adelante, a Latino advocacy group in Watsonville, indicated that 65 percent of the 1,935 people directly or indirectly contacted did not participate in the census four years ago.

Based on those findings, city officials will meet soon to augment their strategy of writing and calling elected officials and the Census Bureau. They have been asking for a total recount since 1992, but have received only spot recounts.

"Their (Adelante's) data looks very solid," Allen said. "Even I was surprised by the amount of non-census respondents, people who said they were there in April of 1990 or had not received a form, or had received nothing in Spanish. It was just no, no, no."

"It really makes me wonder how much more severe it (the undercount) really was."

Allen said one egregious example of oversight involved people who were living in 40 trailers set up by the Federal Emergency Management Agency at the intersection of Madison Avenue and Crestview Drive at the time of the census.

"To qualify to live there you had to have a very large family, six or seven people to a unit," she said. "They counted that lot as zero. It took us four months to get them to recalculate that. It makes you wonder if anybody even went out there. As a planner, I was astounded."

Allen says documentation for

the 565 uncounted units was provided by state records, which showed that all those units were occupied in 1990 even though they weren't included in the census. The city is required to send the state certificates of occupancy each January, and at the city's behest, the state sent the Census Bureau a rebuttal of the latter's figures.

The city also is hoping for help from Congress, and may already have received a boost from a court decision earlier this month.

In 1992, then-Rep. Leon Panetta introduced a resolution making it mandatory for the Census Bureau to recount areas hit by catastrophic events such as the 1989 earthquake. He reintroduced the bill last year, and it presently is being championed by Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel.

Farr also has been pushing an amendment that would make the bill retroactive, meaning Watsonville could collect money for 1990 through 1993. An aide to Farr said the bill is pending.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Court of Appeals in New York ruled Aug. 8 that the Bush administration had undercounted blacks and Hispanics in the 1990 census. The decision could mean an influx of federal money to areas like Watsonville, which was 60.9 percent Hispanic according to the 1990 census.

Celia Organista, director of Adelante, said one reason that agency's survey was done was to find out more about the Latino community than the 1990 census revealed. The Adelante survey was done in a predominantly Latino area, Organista said, "because that (Latino areas) was where we felt the undercount took place."

At the same time, she said, the survey — done by high school stu-

dents either for academic credit or as a summer job — also was intended to show that the census-taking process was flawed.

The students did 408 interviews in four weeks and covered every housing unit in an 11-block area, Organista said.

"The quake displaced people," she said, "but we did what the Census Bureau didn't do. We didn't just assume that people would be where they had been. We went door to door. If the Census Bureau had put as much energy into this and did it as intensely, I don't think you would see this undercount."

Alnwick of the Census Bureau defended his agency's work, and said that four years after the fact, it isn't unusual for a large number of people to forget or not know they were counted.

"I worked on both the 1980 and 1990 censuses," he said, "and you hear that a lot. Some people don't remember doing it. Sometimes somebody else in the household provided the information. Or we might have gotten last-resort information; after repeated callbacks we'll get some basic information from a neighbor. Those are three very good reasons people might not know or remember that they were counted."

Alnwick, a geographer, said the city participated in a review program that allows municipalities to challenge the count "down to the city-block level. We provide all governments with a listing of housing we counted, and they had 45 days to respond to that, which they did (in 1991)."

Based on that, Alnwick said, adjustments were made to Watsonville's count. That is where the matter stands now from the Census Bureau's viewpoint, Alnwick said.

Allen, who has been trying to deal with the bureau for more than four years, says she has been stonewalled.

"The feedback to this point has been that there is no opportunity to make adjustments," she said.