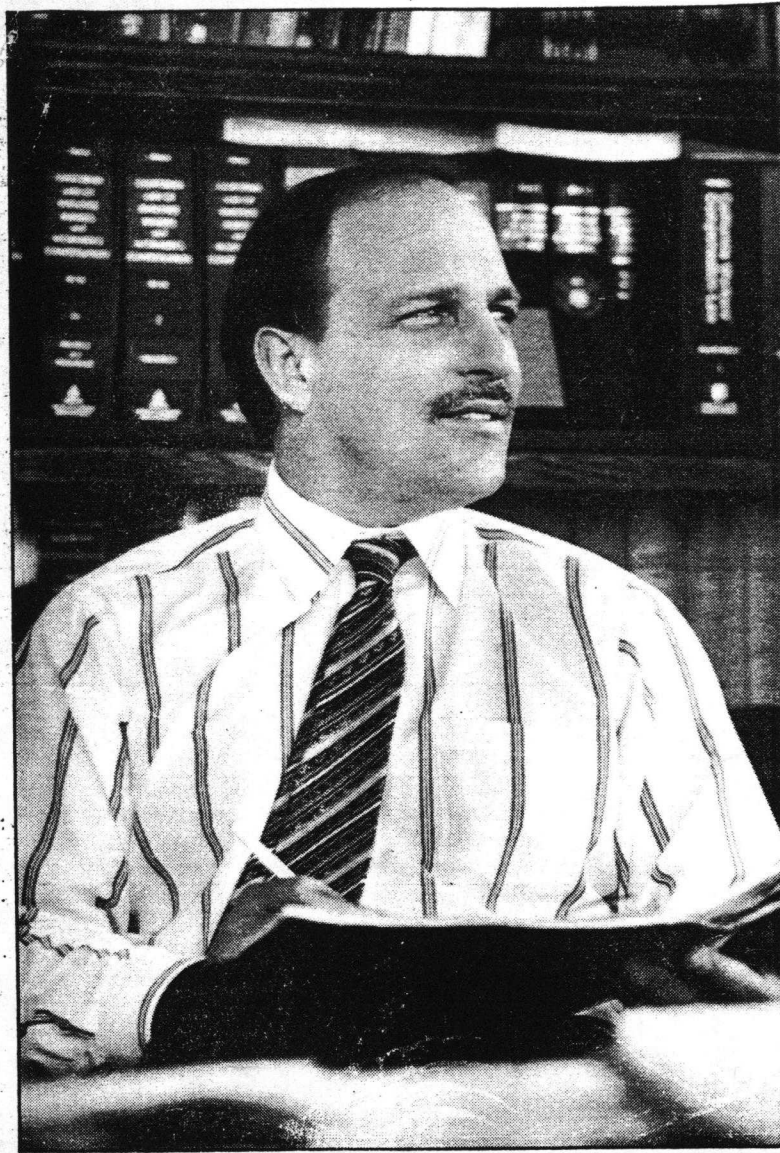


mond said.  
✓ OF HOUSING RP p. 1



By CHELA ZABIN  
STAFF WRITER

DEC 17 1992

Many members of Watsonville's City Council, who came into power in 1989 after a Voting Rights Act lawsuit put district elections into place, campaigned on promises of improving the city's housing.

With housing issues thrust even further into the spotlight following the Loma Prieta earthquake, one of the first actions taken by the council was to put together a committee to research the city's housing problems and make recommendations on how to solve them.

Some of that committee's recommendations, like an ordinance that requires a certain percentage of new development to be "affordable," were put into place. Other recommendations, like rent control, were abandoned as politically unfeasible.

Kurt Ellison

**Councilman Todd McFarren said he recognizes the inspection plan 'is not going to be something everybody loves.'**

# A comprehensive approach to housing

## Home is not a house

A second committee was set up by then-Mayor Todd McFarren to continue work on solutions to the substandard housing problem.

Made up of council members, city staff, housing advocates and a representative of the Watsonville Association of Realtors, the committee has been meeting for more than two years. It has suggested a four-pronged approach to the problem: code enforcement, housing stock improvement, housing inspection and tenant advocacy.

The committee is in the final stages of putting together an ordinance that would establish a regular inspection program for rental housing, raise fees to pay for inspectors and provide relocation assistance for tenants who are displaced as a result of health and safety problems.

Although the ordinance is still in its rough form, what's being considered is this: Every rental unit would be required to be registered with the city. Landlords would pay a fee and submit to a regular inspection for health and safety problems. Certificates would be issued to units that pass the inspections,

and repairs would be required of those that don't. Illegal conversions that don't pose a physical threat could still get certified, although the certificate wouldn't prevent the city from later enforcing zoning regulations.

If an inspector finds a rental unit so uninhabitable that tenants must vacate it, the landlord would be responsible for paying relocation costs up to \$2,000.

The idea, said Assistant City Manager and Fire Chief Gary Smith, is "to try to shift the burden to landlords," rather than having the tenants and the city bear the cost of substandard housing.

There are several things that remain to be worked out, Smith, who is working with the committee, said.

Smith said there are potential pitfalls to some of the plans. The city doesn't want people to think "go to Watsonville, find a shed, get caught living there and the city'll find you a

*This is the last in a series of articles on the problems of substandard housing in Watsonville.*

home'...We need to solve the program regionally."

But Councilman McFarren said he thinks the ordinance will go a long way toward dealing with the substandard housing problem.

He said he's hoping that some extra funds will be generated by stepping up enforcement that could be used toward emergency shelter purposes for displaced tenants.

McFarren said he recognizes the inspection plan "is not going to be something everybody loves."

One committee member, Watsonville Association of Realtors president Brenda Wood, does not love the plan.

"I'll guarantee you it will not work," she said.

Wood said the landlords who have substandard units are not going to register with the city. The ones who will, she said, are the law-abiding ones who don't need the inspection. Wood said the program is really just a way for the city to get funds to pay for inspectors to go after the bad landlords. The honest people, she said, will be paying for the bad ones. That isn't fair, she said.

See HOUSING page 2 ►





Kurt Ellison

Jose and Lolita Opiana and their daughter Raquel, 7, outside their small rental unit, are among the applicants for a home in one of the new affordable housing complexes.

## Nature, politics put heat on housing issue

from page 1

Wood said she called a meeting with all the major landlords in town to explain the proposed ordinance to them. No one was happy, she said. Wood said one landlord, only half-joking, said, "Why don't they just charge us all \$25 a unit and skip the inspection program?"

If the city truly needs to raise money to do inspections, she said, she would like to see the cost borne by all city residents, not just landlords.

Wood said she believes the inspection program will actually hurt tenants because landlords who don't absolutely need the income from their properties will pull units off the market. A number of units in the unincorporated Santa Cruz County area were pulled immediately after the county passed its tenant-relocation ordinance, she said.

The committee cannot, of course, put the ordinance into law. It will have to be considered and passed by the full City Council.

The council has adopted some of the other recommendations made by the committee in the past year: some city codes have been changed to smooth the way for more enforcement; various grants for housing programs were applied for and a redevelopment area that will, among other things, supply funds for affordable housing was revitalized; inspectors have been given the go-ahead for a more aggressive approach, and a part-time deputy city attorney has been hired and directed to give special attention to housing problems.

The city has taken about half a dozen landlords to court over the last six months, has standardized inspection procedures and forms and given several staff trainings.

City staff has continued its efforts to find other housing for people who inspectors find living in substandard housing. Chief Smith said the city has been working for a number of

health and safety and that amnesty should be granted to illegal conversions as long as they are safe.

But residents in lower-density neighborhoods aren't likely to

Some housing advocates say the city should only enforce codes that have to do with health and safety and that amnesty should be granted to illegal conversions as long as they are safe.

years with all the South County agencies that provide shelter and other services for needy people to try to expand and improve services. Smith and others said city inspectors make an all-out effort to find housing for people who end up being displaced, even if it means working overtime to do it.

The committee has also called for the development of more emergency housing for tenants who can't find a place to live because of housing enforcement and recommended that the city work harder to find funds and work with public agencies and private landowners to restore and rebuild existing housing.

Somewhere along the line, the council is going to have to tackle another issue. In some cases, there are no violations of the health and safety code or the fire code in certain conversions — the problem is that they violate zoning regulations, which regulate where different types of housing can be built.

Some housing advocates say the city should only enforce codes that have to do with

support such a program. In fact, many of the complaints the city gets on illegal units come because neighbors suddenly can't find a place to park near their homes or are bothered by an increase in noise or children running around in single-family neighborhoods that used to be quieter and more spacious.

Somehow, said Smith, there's got to be "a check in the system to allow people to have the quiet neighborhoods where they are used to living."

"Where do you draw the line?" asked Paul Bailey, past president of the Watsonville Association of Realtors, and a former committee member. "It would be good for the community of Watsonville to wrestle with this question and come up with a solution."

"If I knew amnesty was coming, I'd build a bunch of units," he said.

The other components to solving the city's housing problems don't seem much closer to accomplishing that goal. The city passed an affordable housing ordinance last year that requires 25 percent of all new develop-

ment to be affordable. But money is tight, and few private developers are building. Many developers say the 25 percent requirement is too high and makes building impossible. To date, no new affordable housing has been built as a result of the ordinance.

Some affordable housing is being built, mostly by non-profit developers, and the city has contributed to some of the projects by waiving fees, providing grants and making loans.

City Manager Steve Salomon said he's proud of the city's record in that respect. He said he's willing to bet that Watsonville has done more in terms of affordable housing than most cities, even larger ones.

But the work doesn't come close to addressing the need. High unemployment rates in the city and dwindling social services money mean more people are unable to afford rents. One local emergency shelter has closed and other programs are full.

Ironically, some forces outside the city's power have contributed to housing improvements.

A number of landlords have just begun to address code violations found and documented years ago because they wanted to refinance their property under the current favorable interest rates, and because they had to get rid of the liens.

The earthquake also brought down a lot of the city's substandard housing, and landlords the city had hassled with for years were forced to rebuild to code.

But as Sister Susan Olson pointed out, that doesn't mean the people who were there moved back in.

"A lot of good stuff went up after the earthquake," she said, "but who can afford it?"