

City gets tougher on unsafe housing

By STEVE SHENDER

Landlords whose rental properties have been posted as unsafe by the city will have to fix the dwellings before they can collect any more rent from their tenants, under an ordinance endorsed by the City Council Tuesday.

Final passage of the measure, which will not come for two weeks, was all but assured Tuesday afternoon as the council voted unanimous approval of the ordinance on its "first reading." The ordinance, which will take effect 30 days after its second reading and final approval Dec. 27, makes it illegal for landlords to collect rent from tenants living in houses or apartments which have been posted by the city as unsafe for human habitation.

Fire officials have checked dozens of structures around town for electrical, plumbing, and other health and safety factors since the inauguration of a

regular inspection program at the beginning of this year. Currently, according to city fire officials, there are 11 posted dwelling units in Watsonville. Officials say that because of the city's acute housing shortage, renters have often continued to live in ramshackle dwellings even after they have been posted. Meanwhile, they say, a number of landlords have dragged their feet on making repairs demanded by the city.

City fire officials said Tuesday that the new ordinance was needed to pressure landlords to make required repairs more quickly, and council members agreed with them.

"I think it's an excellent thing," said Councilman Frank Osmer, who moved for approval of the measure. "It's a good weapon."

City Attorney Don Haile said that once the new ordinance becomes law, both landlords and tenants of posted dwellings will be notified — in English and Spanish — that no more rent may be collected or paid until repairs are made and the units have been deemed safe by the city.