

Quake victims to lose trailers

REBUILDING

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By Bob Johnson
Special to the Mercury News

Watsonville earthquake victims who dream of buying their disaster-relief trailers and developing a cooperative housing project suffered a severe setback Tuesday.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency already has an April deadline to remove the mobile homes.

Now, trailer residents have learned that Santa Cruz County officials will press for speedy removal of the trailers from at least two of the three Watsonville-area parks and have heard dismal forecasts for their ownership hopes.

"The county said they want to move the trailers right away; they said they need the land," said Evangelina Estrada, vice president of the residents' Comité 17 de Octubre. "Now they said we have zero possibilities for the trailer park. We can always move back to live in the cars. I don't want to be trouble for the government."

There was a bit of good news for the trailer residents. During a closed-door session Tuesday of a task force of local, state and federal officials chaired by Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, at Watsonville City Hall, FEMA agreed to wait at least two months before attempting to remove vacant trailers.

'It is an illusion'

County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello represented the county at the meeting.

"It is an illusion for people to believe this is permanent or even long-range housing," Mauriello said. "FEMA is under contractual agreement with the county to remove the trailers by April or when they become vacant."

Mauriello said the county is reluctant to support development of a permanent site for the 120 trailers, which FEMA is willing to sell for \$7,000 apiece, because they are expected to last five to seven years, and the project would cost nearly as much as more permanent housing.

After the meeting, Panetta said a final decision on a permanent site for the trailers will probably be made at the next session of the task force, in mid-January.

"Although it is unlikely a permanent trailer park can be located because of the cost, there will be an effort to exhaust the possibility between now and January," he said.

Affordable housing in works

Seven Watsonville area housing projects with a total of 400 affordable units are already in the works, and Panetta said the task force agreed to give the earthquake victims living in the trailers priority on the new homes. But it will be at least a year before any of those projects are finished.

Meanwhile, local housing agencies are working feverishly to place the trailer families in homes using federal Housing and Urban Development rent vouchers. But none of the officials at the session thought that more than half of the more than 200 trailer residents could be placed before the April deadline.