

Quake-repair permits made easier

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As of today — thanks to the Santa Cruz County board of supervisors and upset rural homeowners — it's going to be easier to get permits to repair earthquake-damaged houses.

After a one-day hiatus, to allow county planners to retrain staff and retool application forms, doors will open this morning on an earthquake-repair division most property owners should find easier to deal with. Gone, for many permit applicants, will be the requirement for expensive geologic studies.

On Tuesday, supervisors agreed to deep-

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six the requirement for geologic studies for nearly all earthquake-related repairs in the so-called “red zone” — that portion of the Santa Cruz Mountains where much of the quake devastation occurred. The board voted 4-0, with Supervisor Robley Levy abstaining, to eliminate the geologic study requirement for repairs costing less

than 50 percent of the value of a damaged structure.

Homeowners in the summit area had complained that the geologic studies were expensive, time consuming and, in many cases, unnecessary. Many said they had been unable to start repairs on their quake-damaged homes because of the re-

quirement.

So far, 2,900 quake-related repair or rebuilding permits have been issued by the county planning department, according to Mike Dever, the agency's chief of administrative services and director of the quake-permit program. In cases where expensive

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geologic reports were done, he said, property owners can feel good about having all the information necessary about potential ground hazards as they designed their projects.

For the 400 applicants currently in the pipeline, he said, the requirement for geologic studies will be dropped as part of the new procedure.

And for the estimated 600 applicants expected to show up between now and Sept. 29 — a Saturday when the earthquake permit division will remain open — the geologic requirement is dropped completely, assuming repairs will cost less than half the value of the house.

After Sept. 29, Dever said, the federal government will stop paying costs of permit-processing for repair of quake damages, and homeowners seeking permits will have to pay the fees themselves.

This does not affect, however, federal programs providing financing for the costs of repairs, Dever said.

In all cases, Dever noted, homeowners must record on their deeds that quake-related repairs were made and, in cases where studies were done, what the results of geologic reports showed about potential hazards.

Geologic reports might still be required in some instances where damage was less than 50 percent, Dever said.

The new rules require applicants to sign a declaration relating to the amount of ground hazards noticeable on their land. In other words, if a property owner declares that he or she does see substantial ground damage, such as a large fissure running under the house, the applicant must declare so. That would trigger a site inspection by

the county.

When damage is more than 50 percent, a site inspection is still required. If the inspector determines, however, that no geologic study is necessary, that requirement is waived under the new rules.

“This should benefit most of the people who've come to the board to complain about this,” said Supervisor Fred Keeley. “This will solve the problem of people whose geologic studies were going to be more expensive than the actual repairs to their homes.”

Supervisors gave homeowners the option of determining the value of their houses. They can value their home at \$81.13 per square foot, then calculate costs of repairs, or they can have a contractor or owner/builder provide a written estimate of the building's market value.