

Earthquake - Watsonville

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Quake homeless looking for a break

Time running out for FEMA residents

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WATSONVILLE — The earthquake victims sheltered at the three Watsonville emergency trailer parks are still searching for help as they ponder their uncertain future.

In less than eight months, the 94 families left at the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer parks at Crestview Avenue, the County Fairgrounds and St. Francis School will be out of their temporary homes unless a break comes their way.

So far, the breaks haven't happened. "We have no money, no land, no hope, no nothing," said Evangelina Estrada, an organizer of the park residents who've banded together under the name, "The Oct. 17 Committee."

Estrada said the residents are running up against the twin problems of not being able to find a home they can afford to rent, and the April 1991 deadline for having to vacate the trailers.

The residents have considered forming a cooperative to purchase property, but that option is proving too expensive, said Maria Corralejo, a housing specialist who's talked with FEMA trailer residents.

The only hope they hold is that Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, can pull out a miracle.

"Congressman Panetta gave us a little hope," Estrada said. "He said maybe he can help us. He's going to meet with FEMA in a few days and maybe get an answer (on the trailers)."

In a speech last week to the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, Panetta vowed to work toward a solution.

"It was important to get those trailers installed. The challenge now is to make sure those families are housed in decent permanent housing this spring," he said.

A FEMA official said Monday the earthquake victims can buy the trailers for a reasonable price — if they have a trailer park to place them in.

"We are authorized to sell the trailers, but they have to have a site to put them on," FEMA coordinating officer Tom Hamner said.

That's a big condition and one that Hamner doesn't think will be overcome in time for the Loma Prieta earthquake victims.

Hamner said FEMA hasn't been able to locate any suitable sites for the trailers in Santa Cruz, Monterey or San Benito counties.

"I don't believe there are that many commercial sites available. We're still trying to get a survey, but the problem

has to do with zoning. Local government is pretty restrictive on where they'll allow a mobile home park to be set up," Hamner said.

Even if a family was able to purchase a single parcel of land, local laws restrict where mobile homes can be placed, he said.

"It's a cruel hoax to say they are for sale and know there are no sites," Hamner said. "We're trying to be very clear about the situation."

Estrada and about two dozen other residents of the FEMA trailer parks urged the City Council last week to help them.

Mayor Todd McFarren referred the issue to the recently formed Human Relations Committee, and named Councilman Oscar Rios as their liaison. But he stopped short of establishing another city committee to deal with the problem, instead directing the residents to work with the county Human Resources Commission, which is the lead agency.

The county agency has begun a program to help the families still living in the emergency trailer parks find permanent housing.

So far, 17 of 111 families originally housed at the trailer parks have relocated, according to Lucy Farre of the local FEMA office. More families from Hollister and Pajaro have vacated the

trailers.

The Human Resources Agency is sending social workers to the three trailer parks to counsel the earthquake victims.

On a case-by-case basis, the workers are attempting to determine how much the families can afford to pay in rent, whether they qualify for subsidized housing and to try to locate new homes for the temporarily displaced.

But Corralejo, who is independently helping the trailer residents, said it isn't easy for the residents to find alternative housing.

"They are finding they have to pay a lot more in rent — sometimes \$200 and \$300 more a month — and they don't have the incomes to support that," Corralejo said.

Even if they can qualify for subsidized rental housing, the restrictions often prove too limiting for the families, she said.

"I am looking for housing all the time," Estrada said. "But I can't find it."

Nearly all the FEMA trailer-park residents work in agriculture and can't afford to spend \$800 to \$1,000 in rent, she said.

"We're asking for help — fast — because we know we have to move," Estrada said. "Right now, we don't see an answer to our problems."