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Census recount sought by city

SEP 23 1992

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Watsonville is asking the federal government to pay for a new special census in Santa Cruz County.

The city and other groups contend that many poor families packed up and left the area right after the Oct. 17, 1989, Loma Prieta earthquake and hadn't returned by the time federal census workers began their decennial head count in April 1990.

Many of those poor have since returned to the Monterey Bay area, but there won't be money available from federal and state anti-poverty and welfare programs to assist them because those grants are based on the figures produced in the once-a-decade federal census.

Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Carmel

Valley, introduced a bill in the House last week that would require the Census Bureau to pay for recounts in communities hit by natural disasters shortly before the census count.

The city or the county could pay for a recount, as was done in 1975, but it would be very costly.

Panetta's bill would open the window for federal recounts throughout the Monterey Bay-San Francisco Bay area, and also for communities hit by Hurricane Hugo on the Eastern seaboard a few weeks before the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Watsonville Assistant City Manager Gary Smith told the City Council last night the city stands to lose about \$1 million in federal aid over the next 10 years unless a recount is made.

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The figures are worse for some of the county's anti-poverty groups. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, for example, provides millions of dollars each year to communities that operate homeless shelter programs.

Chris Lyons, executive director of the Community Action Board — Santa Cruz County's anti-poverty agency — said the county will lose its \$200,000-a-year grant because the 1990 census figures show the poverty rate here dropped before the 11 percent cutoff level.

The council also wants Panetta to add a section to his bill freezing federal appropriations to disaster-affected communities at the pre-1990 census levels until a special count is completed.

If that doesn't happen, said Lyons, the community will lose millions in federal assistance beginning next spring.

The city points to several factors in making its case that the area population was undercounted by the Census Bureau:

- City construction records show the city had 565 more housing units than the census reported.

- School-district records

show a decline of 50 percent more than normal in student enrollment in the six months following the earthquake.

The school district says enrollments normally drop about 2.25 percent between September and April of a school year. But in 1989-90, the drop was 4.75 percent — more than double the norm.

- City records showed a census undercount of 232 housing units in 34 city blocks where census workers had difficulties.

The 34 census blocks represent about 14 percent of the city's 244 census blocks — the smallest division used by the Census Bureau to tally popula-

tion.

The city recanvassed 31 of the 34 census blocks and found that the census had missed 232 housing units.

- Census workers did not count 858 individuals still living in shelters, motels or FEMA-owned trailers in April 1990.

The earthquake severely damaged or demolished over 900 residential units in the city, leaving about 1,200 people homeless.

Another 1,200 to 3,000 people doubled- or tripled-up with other families or friends outside the area but have returned to the city and are now doing farm work.