

Supervisors set low growth rate — with a twist

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Defying the state, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors yesterday unanimously approved a 1 percent growth rate for 1989, but with the stipulation that anyone who wants to build housing affordable to people of low and moderate income may do so.

The supervisors authorized 489 regular building permits for the coming year, but 1,384 permits for anyone who wants to build affordable housing.

Patti Bonar, a representative of the Santa Cruz County Builders Exchange, called the dual permit system "a scam."

"The county is not making a good-faith effort to encourage the construction of either market or non-market rate units," Bonar, whose organization represents builders and their suppliers, told the board.

The dual permit allocation is an attempt to quiet state complaints that because Santa Cruz County sets low annual growth rates, it will not meet its "fair share" of the state's housing needs by 1990.

The state has particularly criticized the county for failing to build enough affordable housing, and transforming the county into an elite enclave.

Ironically, part of the state's threatened punishment to the county is a cut-off of funds that

help lower-income families rehabilitate dilapidated housing.

Other housing grants might also be denied the county because of the low growth rate.

But planners and supervisors have been quick to point out in letters to the state that despite the county's controlled building rate, in 10 years no annual allocation of permits has ever been used up.

More than 1,000 "carryover" permits from previous years remain to augment this year's 489 regular permits, but planners say there will probably be more carryovers from this year's allotment.

Bonar, of the Builders Exchange, predicted the county's ploy of offering special affordable-housing permits would not satisfy the state.

"The county of Santa Cruz cannot demonstrate the availability of vacant sites in the unincorporated areas with density requirements to substantiate the feasibility of the construction of low and moderate-income housing," Bonar said.

The Builders Exchange currently has a lawsuit challenging the county's growth-management law waiting to be heard in the state Court of Appeal. The state's disapproval of the county's low growth rate could strengthen the hand of the Builders Exchange.