

New housing help available for FEMA trailer residents

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WATSONVILLE — The approximately 80 families still living in the three emergency trailer parks here will have to move in less than three months, but alternative housing vouchers are available to help them find new homes.

City, county and federal officials have vowed that none of the residents — who have been living rent-free since they lost their homes in the October 1989 earthquake — will be thrown into the street after the April 18 deadline to move comes.

U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, met recently with Federal Emergency Management Agency officials, along with local housing, county and Watsonville officials, to insure additional housing would be available.

The housing vouchers that are available come under the federal government's section 8 program, said Mary James, executive director of the Housing Authority of Santa Cruz County. Essentially,

trailer-park residents who find private rentals will only have to pay about 30 percent of their monthly income on rent. The balance is paid for them.

James said 53 former trailer-park residents are already using the voucher program, and have moved out of the emergency housing. Another 60 families (of the 80 families remaining) are on a list for housing assistance.

Both James and FEMA coordinating officer Tommie Hamner said Thursday that they are "optimistic" alternative housing will be found. Both also said the soft housing market here should help residents find alternative housing.

Hamner refused to say whether any residents would be allowed temporary extensions if they still haven't found new housing by April 18.

"We're going to wait and see if there's any necessity for extending the deadline," Hamner said. "Hopefully, we won't need one. Everybody is hopeful that new homes will be found."

Watsonville City Councilman Carlos Rios, who is the city's liaison with the trailer-park residents, said, "I'm much more optimistic (about alternative housing being found), but I'm still not totally sure."

"FEMA wants to make sure good-faith efforts are being made to find housing," Rios said. "Things don't move as hoped, it will bring us back to square one. I hope that's not where we're heading."

Hamner said FEMA hopes to begin moving some of the empty trailers at the three parks after Feb. 4. He said advance notice will be given to residents. Two previous attempts to move empty trailers were thwarted by angry residents — the last time in November — after FEMA sent movers in without warning residents.

The three emergency trailer parks are located at the county fairgrounds, behind Crestview shopping center off Freedom Boulevard and at St. Francis Church on Highway 152.