

County asked to go after illegal weekend builders

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SANTA CRUZ — A 24-hour, year-round enforcement team designed to crack down on building and zoning violations would be established under a plan proposed by Supervisor Gary Patton.

But at least one supervisor opposes the idea as moving toward "Big Brotherism."

Patton will ask county supervisors Tuesday to crack down on building- and zoning-code violators. He wants to study the feasibility of creating a round-the-clock, weekend and holiday enforcement team to red tag homeowners who work on their property without paying for county permits.

Frustrated by the amount of "illegal" home-repair work that goes on when county workers are off-duty, Patton has suggested that county workers be employed on weekends and holidays to hand out citations.

He has also suggested a 24-hour hotline be established for neighbors to report violations they see occurring in their areas.

County on-call workers could then swoop down immediately and cite the illegal homeowner.

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"This smacks of Big Brotherism," said Pajaro Valley Supervisor E. Wayne Moore Jr., who was reached for a reaction to Patton's plan.

"I could see endorsing this plan if Gary were also calling for 24-hour service to hand out building permits. But this could be going overboard," Moore said.

He likened the round-the-clock enforcement idea to moving toward a "police state" and added, "It's 1984 and here we have Big Brotherism knocking at our door."

Most violators are homeowners who haven't paid the required fees to get the permits do their work. Often they are red-tagged for grading, cutting down trees, remodeling rooms or repairing roofs and barns.

Violations can cost up to \$500 a day, with each new day a new violation, according to the county code.

In the county, nearly 85 red tags were issued in the period from Dec. 15 through April 15, according to the Planning Department.

"The 24-hour idea may or may not be feasible," said Patton. "But it's worth studying. We have laws on the books that generally are perceived as being excellent

for protecting the environment. The problem is that people with a mind to break the laws will do it, no matter when.

"We need to make government more accessible," he added.

Patton outlined his rationale for the increased enforcement in a letter to the board.

"Significant grading, tree-cutting and construction activity is sometimes carried on without county permits on weekends and holidays, and, as a practical matter, such activities can sometimes escape county enforcement action until after significant environmental or other damage is done," Patton's letter said.

Patton also wants the phone directory to prominently list the hotline number in the white pages so that neighbors can turn in violations in their neighborhood more easily.

Patton suggests "modifying" county personnel work hours and providing "appropriate compensation for such on-call services."

County workers would have to receive overtime wages for working on holidays and weekends.

Moore said he doubted the county could afford such a plan.