

# FEMA, trailer residents talk about the future

By CHELA ZABIN  
STAFF WRITER

Residents of the FEMA trailer parks, city and FEMA officials and representatives of U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta and Assemblyman Sam Farr packed into the Watsonville City Council chambers yesterday afternoon for an emergency meeting spurred by an attempt earlier in the day to remove cinderblocks used to shore up some trailers.

Yesterday morning, an angry crowd met three state Department of Parks and Recreation workers who had been given permission to remove blocks

from the empty trailers at the Crestview trailer site by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

FEMA had left letters on the windshields of the residents' cars saying that the cars would have to be moved away from the empty trailers because FEMA officials were going to do some work in the trailer park.

Park residents feared that the removal of the blocks was the first step in removing the trailers. They surrounded the Parks and Recreation truck, forcing the workers to return the blocks.

Trailer park residents said they were angry and frustrated and thought FEMA was not dealing with them in a respectful and forthright manner.

At the meeting, Frank Kishton, from FEMA's Mountain View office, apologized to the crowd for not communicating clearly what was happening.

"On behalf of FEMA I apologize for the fact that there wasn't communication," he said. "We missed it, and I apologize."

Testimony and questions raised by the residents of the FEMA trailer parks and com-

munity members at the meeting made it clear that yesterday's incident was only one of the areas in which FEMA's actions and intentions have not been clearly understood. Among those are what FEMA intends to do with the trailers that have been vacated by people who have found housing elsewhere and whether the trailers can be purchased by the residents and former residents of the trailer parks.

Maria Cruz Alvarez, a member of a committee of trailer park residents, said that it was

her understanding that in an earlier meeting with Panetta, FEMA had agreed not to remove empty trailers until April. There are many people who are living in overcrowded conditions or in motels as a result of the earthquake, she said, and the empty trailers should be used to house them.

A representative of the local Legal Aid office said that her office is involved in a number of appeals of applications that have been turned down by FEMA, and that the trailers should not be removed until those appeals have been reviewed, since there may be more people eligible for the trailers.

Watsonville Mayor Todd McFarren and Maria Corralejo, the director of Watsonville Area Interfaith Disaster Relief, also said FEMA had agreed to leave the trailers in Watsonville until April.

Kishton said that it was his understanding that FEMA had agreed to keep the empty trailers only until all the appeals in the area had been reviewed. All of them have now been, he said. The trailers need to be taken away for "refurbishing" so they can be ready for the next disaster, he said.

But Christine Johnson-Lyons, executive director of the Community Action Board, told Kishton that at the April meeting FEMA had said that there were no appeals pending. And, she said, CAB knows of a number of cases where people with pending appeals were still waiting to hear from FEMA.

Other speakers appealed to FEMA to keep the option of

purchasing the trailers open. Several weeks ago, the residents of the trailer parks received a letter asking them to indicate their interest in purchasing the trailers at a cost of \$7,000 each. There was some confusion as to whether a two-week deadline mentioned in the letter meant that residents had two weeks to purchase the trailers or two weeks to respond to the letter.

Delila Guzman, a trailer park resident, asked FEMA to pay attention to the effects actions like the attempted removal of the cinderblocks has on the trailer park residents.

"We are looking for the land, we are negotiating (to buy the trailers)," she said. "Please be very careful what you guys are doing, let us know before you do anything ... Our kids have been really traumatized by the earthquake, not only by the earthquake, but by FEMA. We need more time."

Kishton said FEMA would be working with the interested families on a case-by-case basis and that no across-the-board deadline had been set for the residents to get financing and find a location for the trailers.

Kishton said that the trailers people were living in would not be removed before April. He also said that if, in April, the people living in the trailers had been unable to find housing, FEMA would not put them out on the street.

At the suggestion of Councilman Oscar Rios, Kishton agreed that FEMA would not remove any trailers between now and a meeting with Panetta, which will take place within two weeks. It was also agreed that FEMA officials would meet with CAB to see what had happened with the appeals.