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A family's shattered dream of country living

County tells 4 families to leave mobile homes

By JENNIFER KOSS
STAFF WRITER

SETTLING DOWN on 12 acres in the country near Watsonville a few months ago was a dream come true for the Cranmer family.

Until they found their little corner of heaven, complete with garden space and an apple orchard overlooking Pinto Lake, the housing picture in Santa Cruz County had looked bleak for the Cranmers — a family of five living on \$859 a month. So when Dennis and Sue Cranmer spotted landowner Gary Abkin's ad in a local newspaper, they wasted no time in calling.

"The first thing he asked me was, 'Do you have kids?'" Sue Cranmer said.

Abkin surprised her then by saying, "Good," and soon the Cranmers had the home they'd always wanted — with room for their three young children to laugh and holler and grow, away from the traffic, noise and dangers of the city.

Unfortunately for the Cranmers and three other families living with their children in mobile homes on Abkin's Amesti Road property, however, county building and zoning codes don't make allowances for happy endings. The families' dreams were shattered about three weeks ago by an edict to move by May 4.

Abkin was notified in late January that the number of mobile homes on the property was illegal, after the situation was brought to the county's attention by complaints from neighbors, said Martin Jacobson, county zoning-code enforcement officer. An investigation also resulted in a "red tag" on the property at that time.

Jacobson said illegal wiring installed to hook up the mobile homes threatens not only the families living in them but

allowed on the property, he said.

Abkin said he is in the process of applying for a permit for that one home, and is hoping the Cranmers will be allowed to remain on the property as caretakers. There's little hope for the others; Abkin has been trying to find a way for them to stay, but now the county will start taking legal action against him if they don't move, he said.

The problem is that even if they could afford it, there's nowhere to go, said Laurie Rice, who lives in one of the mobile homes with her husband, Joe, and their two children.

When she first saw Abkin's property, "I thought, oh boy, this is going to be wonderful," Laurie recalled fondly. "I said, this is paradise; it's just what I've always wanted."

Now she and Joe are being forced to exchange their home for a travel trailer because they've been unable to find a space in a mobile-home park and can't afford high rents, she said.

The plan is to move from campground to campground — a lifestyle Laurie said she's not looking forward to after Abkin's sprawling acreage.

"I don't know what else we can do," she said.

Meanwhile, Sue Cranmer has been frantically calling everyone she can think of for help, from politicians to public agencies, but with no luck so far. A woman at the Housing Authority of Santa Cruz County told her the list of people seeking housing is a long one.

"She told me to call her back in April of 1991," Sue said.

Last week, the Cranmers and Rices in desperation attended a meeting on poverty, held by the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, to request



The Cranmers and three other families may have to leave their Amesti Road home next week because their mobile homes violate county codes. From left

are Dennis Cranmer holding Dennis Jr., 2, Heather, 4, Jamie, 3, and Sue, in front of the family's 1955 Ford pickup truck.

Kurt Ellison

Joanna Roskowitz, an administrative aide of Mehl's, said yesterday no real extension existed, but that legal action would not likely be taken against Abkin for about three weeks, "so they actually have more time." There's not much else she can do, Roskowitz said.

Johnson-Lyons said this morning she'll be taking the story of the families' plight to community groups in hopes of finding housing for them.

Meanwhile, Roskowitz pointed out that she sym-

Abkin is a real estate appraiser and familiar enough with the law to know he was violating it, she added.

"He makes himself out to be a benign landowner who is helping out these people," Roskowitz said, "when he's really a land investor."

However, Abkin said the 12 acres didn't start out as a mere investment. He and his wife, who now live in Campbell, had the intention of building their dream home on a lot, which is above a lake, but after three or four months, discovered that all

mobile home to help make their \$1,960 monthly payments, he said.

Close to 100 people showed up in response to the ad, he said, "but what you saw and you couldn't see through was the kids ... and every one of them were looking up at you with their big eyes saying, 'Take me, take me.'"

He'd never done anything illegal before, Abkin said, but he and his wife decided there was space for three more besides the one they'd planned for. Tenant qualifications

yard and other amenities; the rents include utilities. The house, which Abkin does not consider low-income like the others, is rented for \$825 monthly.

Abkin said he's been at least \$1,000 in the red each month because of such expenses as a new septic tank, rock for the driveway, electrical wiring and a new fence, which Dennis Cranmer built, Abkin said. He and Cranmer were planning a children's park when the notice to move arrived from the county.

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Jacobson said illegal wiring installed to hook up the mobile homes threatens not only the families living in them but neighbors who could be endangered if a fire broke out. The situation on Abkin's property is perceived as "a very serious threat to health and safety," Jacobson said.

Only an existing house and one mobile home could be

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Last week, the Cranmers and Rices in desperation attended a meeting on poverty, held by the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, to request help. CAB Executive Director Christine Johnson-Lyons and CAB county representative Karen Delaney said yesterday they'd talked to Supervisor Sherry Mehl's office and were under the impression an extension had been granted on the moving deadline.

Joanna Roskowick, an administrative aide of Mehl's, said yesterday no real extension existed, but that legal action would not likely be taken against Abkin for about three weeks, "so they actually have more time." There's not much else she can do, Roskowick said.

Johnson-Lyons said this morning she'll be taking the story of the families' plight to community groups in hopes of finding housing for them.

Meanwhile, Roskowick pointed out that she sympathizes with the families, but that other people are in the same bind and make concessions to survive, such as moving into apartments.

"Housing is a hardship in this county," she said. "It just is; that's a fact."

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However, Abkin said the 12 acres didn't start out as a mere investment. He and his wife, who now live in Campbell, had the intention of building their dream home on a lot, which is above a lake, but after three or four months, discovered that all the studies and permits required would cost \$20,000 to \$30,000, Abkin said.

"We could afford either a home or the permits, but we couldn't afford both," he said.

It was at that point they decided to advertise space for a

mobile home to help make their \$1,960 monthly payments, he said.

Close to 100 people showed up in response to the ad, he said, "but what you saw and you couldn't see through was the kids ... and every one of them were looking up at you with their big eyes saying, 'Take me, take me.'"

He'd never done anything illegal before, Abkin said, but he and his wife decided there was space for three more besides the one they'd planned for. Tenant qualifications included having children and not being drug users, he said. Everyone was also warned the county could shut them down if there were complaints.

As the caretakers, the Cranmers were charged \$200, two families paid \$350 and the fourth paid \$475 for a larger

yard and other amenities; the rents include utilities. The house, which Abkin does not consider low-income like the others, is rented for \$825 monthly.

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He can understand the county's position, Abkin said, but it's difficult not to feel for homeless families. When he's called Mehl's office to see what was being done for them, he said, "their answer was they're not doing anything."