

Progress on FEMA, downtown, Highway 1

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A bilingual FEMA representative will open an office in Watsonville next week, more buildings will be set for demolition in downtown Watsonville, and a date has been set for the reopening of Highway 1 over Struve Slough.

Local, state and federal officials gave progress reports on post-earthquake projects at a meeting of the Disaster Task Force at the Santa Cruz County Governmental Center Saturday.

Joe Dominguez, a FEMA representative from San Francisco, will open an office in Watsonville

this week. Dominguez said he would try to find office space downtown, at the request of several local Latino leaders who want the office to be as accessible to their community as possible.

Dominguez, who is bilingual, will be working with people who have been denied rental assistance by FEMA, haven't been able to find housing despite having been issued a FEMA check, or who have other special circumstances or needs that aren't considered in the general FEMA process.

Supervisor Sherry Mehl said Dominguez was introduced to local politicians and Latino com-

munity leaders in a meeting Friday night. Outreach to let people know about the service has already begun, she said.

Ground has been broken for mobile homes at the Crestview site behind the courthouse on Freedom Boulevard, said Luther Perry, chairman of the Housing Recovery Task Force.

When a Caltrans representative said the pads wouldn't be ready for the mobile units by Dec. 1, U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta asked if there was anyway the process could be speeded up.

Part of the problem, the Caltrans representative said, is that

not all the different phases of construction can be worked on at once. Panetta said he'd see what he could do about getting the utilities to work more quickly and told Perry to let him know if there are any delays in construction.

"The only way this is going to work is if we continue to beat at people," Panetta said.

The representative said Caltrans workers surveyed the site this weekend, and telephone and PG&E workers are scheduled to begin work this week. Things are moving as fast as they can, he

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said.

But Watsonville City Councilman Dennis Osmer said this morning that he went out to the site this weekend, and Caltrans crews were nowhere to be seen.

He said he was going to contact State Sen. Henry Mello to see if pressure could be put on Caltrans to get to work, and that he would put the issue on the council agenda. The city is responsible for putting in water and sewer lines, and Osmer said he wants to make sure the city works to "expedite things" in getting the mobile units up.

"We've already lost two days," he said, noting that during the meeting, government officials had taken FEMA to task for initial delays in the process. "My concern is that the buck does stop with the city. We've taken on a contract (to put in the temporary housing), and we need to deliver."

Saturday Osmer said that progress was being made on looking into using the St. Francis School grounds on East Lake Avenue for a temporary mobile home site. He said that representatives of the Salesian order, which owns the property, had presented a list of conditions concerning safety and use of the property, and that it looked like the conditions could be met. He couldn't give a date on when an agreement might be reached, but said things were proceeding with "greatest haste," said Osmer.

Perry said once agreements were made, he didn't think it would take as long to set up housing at the fairgrounds and St. Francis as it has at the Crestview site.

A Caltrans representative said bidding on the repairs to Highway 1 south of the Main Street exit

would begin Nov. 17, and that work should be completed between April and June. Improvements, including traffic signals and drainage corrections will be included in the repairs. Cost for the Highway 1 work is estimated at \$6 million, Mehl said before the meeting.

Speaking on business recovery, Mayor Betty Murphy said the city was looking into the possibility of using "lease-back" procedures to keep Ford's department store and other businesses in the downtown. She also mentioned a plan that is being hatched to set up a private redevelopment agency to rebuild downtown.

"Main Street is open but wobbly," she said, adding that the city should have a more definite idea of which buildings are coming down this week.

Murphy said her "hat's off to Santa Cruz for getting the Chamber and Downtown Association together to be landlords" for the tent shops that went up behind

the Pacific Garden Mall this weekend.

The mayor said there had been some discussion of setting up a similar tent mall on the vacant 200 block of Main Street.

Panetta gave a quick summary of bills that have been passed in the House to provide relief to earthquake-devastated areas. One of the new bills he has introduced would make Watsonville eligible for the Rural Housing Assistance Program. Watsonville currently isn't eligible for the program because it isn't considered a rural area.

But Gustavo Cairo, from Farmers Home Loan, said that his organization still couldn't make the federally guaranteed loans to most people in Watsonville because of a regulation that prevents loans to homes on private roads that serve more than two households.

Panetta said he was unaware of that restriction, and said he'd see what he could do.

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