

Metro

Santa Ana groups protest housing-code crackdown

City to seek more funds for relocations

By Jesus Mena
The Register

SANTA ANA — City Manager Robert Bobb promised housing advocates and social service agency representatives late Thursday that he would try to free some city revenue for emergency housing for renters who may be displaced by the city's stepped-up code-enforcement program.

Bobb made the commitment at a special meeting of some 40 irate community representatives who oppose the code-enforcement program.

The three-year program, which officially went into effect Monday, calls for a canvassing of housing in the central third of the city. The 18 city inspectors are combing the area, searching for substandard units and overcrowded conditions. City officials estimate 15,000 of the 30,000 housing units in the target area have serious code violations.

Although everyone present agreed that the central city's dilapidated housing is in need of a major overhaul, critics said the city's war on slum landlords discriminated against lower-income residents. They contend that the poorer residents who will be forced to evacuate substandard dwellings will be unable to afford alternate housing and could wind up on the streets.

City officials estimate 1,500 of the housing units in the target area will require evacuation in order to execute repairs needed to bring them up to code. Critics say thousands more families will have to leave their rented homes when landlords try to recoup costs of repairs by raising the rents.

Phil Freeland, director of the city's Planning and Development Services, assured the gathering that evacuation of tenants would be minimal and said the press "has done a disservice" by exaggerating the potential displacement.

"We will work with the tenants to minimize disruption," Freeland said. "We are administering the program in a sensitive fashion."

Most tenants are given 30 to 60 days to vacate substandard dwellings, Freeland said.

He added that some renters were

living in conditions that pose serious fire hazards because of exposed wiring and overloaded circuits. People living in such conditions have to be moved out because of the immediate threats to life, he said. In those cases, he said, the city helps relocate tenants.

"I object to the statements that the city has done all it can to help relocate families displaced by code enforcement," said Jean Forbath, director of Share Our Selves, an agency which aids indigents with emergency housing.

Forbath said her agency has been helping place families whose rented homes were condemned by the city. She said these families were given no assistance by the city and were channeled to her agency's office.

Forbath said Orange County's social service agencies are turning dozens of homeless people away daily because they cannot afford to help them. These agencies will not be able to handle the numbers that may be left homeless by the city's new program, she said.

"You are so worried about the electrical problems in these places, but where are these people supposed to go?" asked Martha

HOUSING: Groups protest code crackdown

FROM B1

Ramirez, president of Santa Ana Neighborhood Organization.

"The net effect of this program is discriminatory because it is aimed at the low- and moderate-income people," said Gene Scorio, director of the Orange County Fair Housing Council. "It is an abdication of responsibility not to deal with the needs of the people who will be displaced by this program."

Freeland agreed that the resources the city has for relocation purposes are limited, but he said it was his moral responsibility to make sure people do not die in a garage ignited by faulty wiring.

Joe Caux of the Community Development Council said the city's program tended to punish the tenants more than the slum landlords. He pointed out that the landlord is levied a \$150 administrative fee when the city issues him a notice of violation for renting out an unsafe dwelling. The tenant who refuses to vacate an unsafe housing unit, however, faces fines of up to \$500 per day for every day the city's order to vacate is disobeyed.

Merle Rabine asked if the city could increase the administrative fee dramatically and use the in-

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Martha Ramirez, president of Santa Ana Neighborhood Organization

creased revenue to relocate tenants. Bobb said the city attorney informed him such a move would be illegal.

Ralph Kennedy of the Orange County Fair Housing Council asked Bobb if he would consider altering the program in the interests of reducing the impact on the poorest renters. He suggested that the city could take a slower approach, targeting smaller problem neighborhoods and making sure that all who need to move would be provided with alternate housing.

"The problem exists now and we have to deal with it now," Bobb said as he acknowledged the city's intent to continue with the program.

Bobb said he was sensitive to the potential social problems displacement could cause. He assured the group that he would get his staff to work today on freeing up money to provide as much help with emergency housing as possible.

Bobb added that the county government would have to provide help. Scott Morgan, an aide to county Supervisor Roger Stanton, was at the meeting but did not comment on the proceedings.

The program's target area is home to tens of thousands of the county's poorest residents. Eight of the 10 poorest census tracts in the county are located in the target area, where annual per capita income ranges from \$3,367 to \$4,530, the 1980 census shows. The low per capita income is reflective of the high unemployment in the area, which city officials say was about 18 percent as opposed to 6.5 percent citywide in February.

According to the 1980 census, Santa Ana has the the largest percentage of low-income residents of all cities in the county. Slightly more than 14 percent of the population in Santa Ana lives below the poverty level — defined as \$7356 annually for a family of four.