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Numbers down' on housing

EIR says project won't 'fit' in industrial area

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A final environmental impact report for proposed farm-worker housing on West Lake Avenue isn't any kinder to the project than the draft version had been.

Both the final and draft reports say there are severe problems with the proposed project, which would put 18 low-cost, two-, three- and four-bedroom units for farm-worker families on the 1.4-acre parcel that used to house Watsonville Lumber.

The project, Beachwood Village, is being proposed by the Pajaro Valley Affordable Housing Corporation. The EIR was prepared by Coats Consulting in Capitola.

The draft version of the report, released last fall, found two major problems with the project — the health and safety of its future residents and the loss of industrial land. Although only two-thirds of an acre of the site is zoned industrial, the report said putting housing in the industrial area would restrict uses nearby and the loss had to be viewed as part of a cumulative loss of such land.

The report said converting this land could lead to "incremental conversion" of adjacent industrial and commercial land, resulting in a loss of jobs and sales tax to the city.

It also said the location would pose hazards to residents, especially children, such as truck traffic, noise and the possibility of a major spill of ammonia or other dangerous materials. It said the location of the project near the canneries and a union hall exposed residents to the possibility of violence should another major cannery strike occur.

The final report contains letters responding to the draft report and responds to them, making some minor changes in its findings.

Kathy Bernard, executive director of the housing corporation,

sent a long letter arguing against many of earlier report's findings.

Bernard's main arguments are that the area is already heavily used for housing and the loss of industrial land would be negligible.

Bernard said the housing corporation surveyed the neighborhood and held a public meeting with residents to talk about health and safety. Residents said they haven't had any problems with the truck traffic, Bernard said, and didn't think some of the other issues, like noise and living next to businesses that use hazardous materials, were serious problems.

All the people Bernard's group talked to about the proposed

project "said they would like to live there." Bernard said she did take some of the concerns raised in the report to heart, scaling down the project from 24 to 18 units and enlarging an enclosed play area inside the project to discourage children from playing in the streets. The project will have a manager and residents will be educated about potential hazardous-materials risks and how to protect themselves, she said.

Bernard said increasing residential uses downtown was one of the recommendations of the Urban Land Institute, which came to Watsonville last year and issued a plan for earthquake recovery. She said that part of town is in transition,

with many of the industrial companies moving or going out of business.

The report writers defended their earlier findings, making only a few minor changes as a result of her comments.

"I think (the report) was very biased in lots of ways," Bernard said. For example, she said, saying a location near a union hall exposed residents to potential violence was ridiculous.

A letter sent by Watsonville's Fire Chief Gary Smith echoed the report's concerns about residents' safety. Smith said he was worried about the possible accidental re-

lease of ammonia gas or other hazardous materials and the department's ability to protect residents.

Paul Trucking Co., which is near the project site and is opposed to it, sent a letter of protest, agreeing with the report's findings and raising additional points about what it says is the inappropriateness of the site for residences.

The letter, signed by Surjit S. Tut, owner of the company, says his company wants the affordable-housing company to be able to recover its losses if a permit is denied. He said his company is willing to do one of two things: Trade a two-acre parcel elsewhere for the West Lake Avenue parcel, or purchase the property.

The report writers recommend those alternatives be seriously considered by the city.

But Bernard said she has already been approached by Tut on the option to trade parcels and found his offer unfeasible. Bernard wouldn't say where the two-acre parcel she was offered was, but did say it was a small part of a larger property zoned for agricultural use and has been the center of a long-running politically heated debate having to do with preserving ag land.

Besides what Bernard said was the political unfeasibility of getting approval for residential use of the site, water and sewer lines would have to be built, adding years to the project.

"There was no way we could do anything with those two acres," she said.

Bernard said the company hasn't offered to buy the West Lake Avenue property, but said she would only consider selling it if the offer was really good and another site was available.

She said she was banking on support for the project from the City Council, which can vote to override the EIR's concerns because of the need for affordable housing.