

City agreeable to new fee for flood control

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It appears that Pajaro Valley residents may soon pay \$15 more a year to help pay for \$3.5 million in badly needed flood-prevention projects.

But Watsonville City Council members said last night they're going to need some better accounting of how the funds are spent before they'll allow the county to begin assessing the tax later this year.

County supervisors want to establish a new flood-prevention zone in the Pajaro Valley to fund 13 major maintenance and construction projects that the existing Pajaro Storm Drain Maintenance District, another county-run agency, can't afford.

In addition to the money each property owner already pays to support the storm drain district, county officials propose to charge all residents, including apartment dwellers and residents of mobile homes, \$15 a year, according to Watsonville City Manager John Radin. Owners of vacant or agricultural land would be charged \$4 an acre each year, and a \$100-per-acre charge would be levied for all commercial and industrial lands, he said.

The county can't levy the new taxes without the approval of the city, however, because the city makes up more than half the assessed value of the proposed zone.

Mayor Ann Soldo called the county's proposal "double taxation" but agreed with her fellow council members that the money has to be raised to get the projects done.

Flooding in many Watsonville-area neighborhoods is a constant threat during heavy rains. The \$3.5 million list of projects the county proposes during the next 10 years includes installation of a variety of pumps, culverts and storm drains to solve recurring problems, according to the city Public Works Department.

Council members are leery of the proposal, however, because they say the county has already "misused" money collected through the existing maintenance district from Pajaro Valley property owners. And they don't like the idea of giving the county control of more money without a better idea of how local funds will be spent.

"If we don't improve the accounting of funds, we're not going to get any better service," Mayor Soldo said.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy was especially concerned.

"I haven't hidden the fact that (I believe) it's sometimes difficult to work with the county," she said.

Murphy said she wants an analysis of exactly how much the city would benefit from the

proposed projects and whether the amount city residents would contribute is equal to that percentage of benefit.

Council members agreed they want quarterly status reports, an accounting of money spent on each project, and more control over which projects would be done. The county has already said the city would be allowed to withdraw its support from the new zone, thus killing the tax.

In the end, however, it appears the charges will be levied.

"We all know we have a flooding problem, and we all know we have to solve it," Councilman Rex Clark said. "And if this is the way to do it, then we should."

A meeting was tentatively set for Sept. 3 between the council and supervisors E. Wayne Moore Jr. and Robley Levy, whose districts lie within the flood-prevention area, to work out the details of an agreement.

Public Works Department administrators from both the city and the county already agree. They drew up the latest funding scheme, which they say would produce \$5.6 million over 10 years.

The money would be used on the 13 major projects and would fund annual maintenance of local rivers and streams that aren't being maintained because there isn't enough money in the Pajaro Storm Drain Maintenance District, which collects about \$60,000 a year from local property owners.

The projects that would be funded by the new tax include: pumps and culverts on Shell Road, pumps in Harkins Slough, new culverts in Watsonville Slough, improved drainage and a higher roadway along Lee Road at both Watsonville Slough and Struve Slough, similar improvements at Harkins Slough Road and Struve Slough, a storm drainage system at Coleman Avenue and across East Lake Avenue, raising the levee in the College Lake area, new culverts at College Road near College Lake, a new drainage system at Freedom Lake, new storm drains and culverts for Green Valley Apartments and College and Coward roads, and new drainage ditches for West Beach Road and Jesus Creek.

In other business last night, the council agreed on a reduction in storm-drain fees for developers who build on-site detention ponds to collect storm runoff.

Few developers actually ever build such detention ponds. But when they do, the council said, they deserve a reduction in the fees because the ponds lessen the impact on the city's storm drain system, which the fees are collected to support.

REFERENCE