

Watsonville group seeks to preserve farm land

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The steering committee working on updating Watsonville's General Plan to the year 2005 opted last night for preservation of agricultural lands west of Highway 1 and of the city's "scenic corridors."

In adopting a housing plan that Chairman John Kane referred to as "our last recipe," which is now up to the Planning Commission and the City Council to act on, the committee decided to change the site proposed for a 320-unit housing development from an area west of the freeway and north of Beach Road to the 156-acre Landmark Business Park.

Development west of the freeway could "impede agriculture" and act as a catalyst for development on farmland, Planning Director Bud Carney said.

Future urban development, according to the housing plan, would take place within and adjacent to the present city limits, where growth would be "most logical," according to Carney. "And most logical is where services can be provided

at the least amount of cost toward providing those services."

The plan will now be the topic of a "town hall" meeting at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, at the Watsonville Senior Center.

One concern expressed last night by Celia Organista, president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, was whether the plan leaves enough room for affordable housing. She wondered if the city should be looking further from its boundaries toward lands considered "marginal" agriculturally.

However, Kane said undeveloped land can change from "marginal" to "prime" depending on use.

"If you go out Larkin Valley Road, that's not prime agricultural today," he said, "but if florists came in and found they can grow roses on it, then it's prime agricultural land."

Carney also said the chance for affordable housing is greater in areas such as Landmark that are zoned for more dense development and which are cheaper to develop because of their proximity to the city.

As for the "scenic corridor" designation on some streets in and near Watsonville, committee members and planners made it clear that doesn't necessarily mean restricting development.

What it means, planner Maureen Owens said, is that development would not be allowed to have a negative impact on what is there now.

A Scenic Highway Element was one of the state-mandated parts of the General Plan in 1974, planner Meredith Roeder said, but is no longer required. An element adopted in 1975 proposed certain streets and highways for the designation — Highways 1 and 152, Riverside Drive, Bridge Street and Pennsylvania Drive/Loma Prieta Avenue — but none were ever actually designated.

Roeder explained how a street might be named "scenic" with a slide show of streets that fit several of a proposed list of six criteria: streets with background views and vistas, an absence of clutter, interesting features, significant vegetation, variety and a potential for improvement.