

Watsonville - Growth RP

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Memo reflects vexation over county land policy

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The age-old conflict between the city and county is still very much alive. That much was evident in a discussion of the county's General Plan at last night's City Council meeting.

City staff had studied the county's plan, which outlines proposed growth and sets land-use policy, and submitted its analysis of the plan to the council. The City Council itself is working on a General Plan for the city and its outlying areas. It is common practice for local jurisdictions to comment on each other's plans.

The staff memo on the plan was nothing short of scathing.

Planner Charles Eadie criticized the county plan for being based on the idea that there are natural limits, or a holding capacity, to growth. The plan doesn't clearly define that term, he said.

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'With its sanguine use of the term "natural limits," the County Plan suggests that it has defined something that has eluded philosophers for centuries.'

— Planner Charles Eadie

phers for centuries," he wrote in the memo.

A holding, or carrying, capacity in ecological terms means that there is a resource-based limit to how many members of any particular species can survive in a given area.

"It seems to be a good definition when you're talking about cattle," Eadie told the council last night. But, he argued, it can't be applied to people because there are too many variables involved.

Far from being scientific, the county's plan is "value-laden," he

said. It would be better, he said, if the county would just come out and admit what its priorities are.

Eadie said the county's policies, which generally call for low-density building in remaining developable areas, will lead to high-priced housing, inefficient use of converted farm land and suburban sprawl.

Councilman Todd McFarren pointed out that the driving philosophy behind Watsonville's plan — accessing the likely demo-

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graphic changes in the area and trying to plan for them in terms of jobs and housing — could be considered "value-laden" too.

"It seems to me they're both value-laden," he said. Although he agreed with many of Eadie's specific criticisms of the plan, McFarren suggested that the city not approach the plan on a "high-ground, contentious kind of level." Pointing to more specific remarks and suggestions of how the two plans could be reconciled in the staff report, he said, "that approach probably is going to be more constructive."

The rest of the council agreed with McFarren, and suggested that the city's final comments to the county be toned down a bit.

Nonetheless, Mayor Oscar Rios took the opportunity to express his distrust of the county's planners.

"They're trying to be sly, they're trying to be creative," he said. The city should let the county know, he said, "we know what you're doing, we know what you're up to."

The council and staff's specific criticisms of the plan were:

- Because the county is not planning for high-density housing — which the city contends is necessary for the creation of affordable housing — it will not meet what has been determined to be its "fair share" of affordable housing.

According to the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, which determines such things, the county should plan for 5,507 low-income housing units by 1996. In contrast, the plan would only pro-

duce 355. Watsonville, the council contends, will have to pick up the slack.

- The county's General Plan proposes the conversion of 262 acres of agriculturally designated for other uses. But because high densities for housing aren't being considered, the lost farmland won't be used as efficiently as it could be. Such policies also conflict with Watsonville's plan, which suggests higher density building in the areas immediately outside the city limits. Watsonville's intention is to provide as many homes for residents as possible, limit urban sprawl, and convert farm land sparingly.

- The county's plans for road improvements and widenings are based on much lower densities than the city would like if it is to annex and build in certain areas, particularly the Buena Vista-Calabasas area.

- The county plan does not identify the areas being eyed by the city for annexation as being available for city expansion or for "urban reserve." This, the council and staff fear, could set up a reason for the county to oppose annexations.

The plan also calls for limited development on the Franich property, which the city is hoping to annex and develop for housing.

Altogether, said Rios, "that would mean a lot of sprawl. It contradicts a lot of the ideas we've been having about making cities livable — about planning for transportation, shopping. This to me doesn't make any sense."

Councilman Lowell Hurst said he had "concerns for the potential of urban sprawl ... for creating half-million dollar homes on the outskirts of Watsonville. It doesn't deal with affordable housing."

Asked to explain the county's thinking, Eadie said most of the people who turned out for the public hearings the county held on the plan pushed to keep growth out of their areas. The planners tried to abide by their wishes in the plan by keeping building densities pretty much the same as they are now.