

VCF HOUSING RP 4/4/90

Watsonville's housing crisis

Task force has a few suggestions

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A rent-control ordinance, a requirement that 25 percent of the units in new housing developments be "affordable," and amnesty for illegal accessory units that are voluntarily brought up to housing codes are among the recommendations the Watsonville Housing Task Force will present to the City Council next week.

The task force was established by the council in January to look at the city's housing problems and bring recommendations to the council. The group, composed of

representatives from 23 local organizations, met for the last time last night and approved 36 recommendations. Those recommendations will come before the council at its Tuesday meeting.

Chuck Barr, a local commercial florist and former Santa Cruz County Planning Commissioner, headed the task force, which met seven times to discuss various ways of dealing with housing problems, take public input, and hammer out its proposals. The Mid-Peninsula Housing Coalition, a Palo Alto organization that has helped set up 1,600 housing units

in the Bay Area, provided staff support to the task force.

Barr said the task force decided that at least three-quarters of its members would have to agree in order for a recommendation to be adopted.

One of the ideas the group discussed but did not ultimately recommend was converting the municipal airport to housing. Barr said the task force heard from a number of people supporting the idea at each of its meetings, but that it was "so inflammatory" that the group decided, for the sake of time, to drop it and get on with

the other recommendations it had.

The difficulty of providing sufficient affordable housing in Watsonville was not lost on the task force. In a draft of its report to the council, it estimated that 60 percent of families who make less than the median income and 25 percent of the population live in overcrowded conditions. Assuming that all the earthquake-damaged affordable units can be restored, the task force believes that 2,600 new, affordable units are needed to relieve crowding, with an additional 90 units needed each year to

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accommodate growth. At current densities the city could only produce 1,900 new dwellings before reaching "build out," the report said.

If 500 new units were built each year, the housing needs of all income groups could be met in 10 years.

"However, at the historic growth rate of 175 to 200 new units each year, the current shortfall will never be met," it said.

Among the group's recommendations are a city housing policy that would prohibit development on prime or viable producing ag-

ricultural land; urging Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey counties to provide more low- and moderate-income housing in the Pajaro Valley; offer some waivers of infrastructure requirements and a priority planning and permit process to developments with 40 percent of homes affordable to people making half or less of Watsonville's median income; and to act to insure whenever possible that preference in housing is given to residents or workers in the Pajaro Valley.

The group is also suggesting a rent-control ordinance that would include a rent board, limits on annual rent increases, vacancy control and a just-cause-for-eviction clause and that the city grant amnesty and "grandfather in" accessory units that are voluntarily brought up to code and include a provision for affordability. In cases where landlords refuse to bring those units up to code, the task force suggests an ordinance forcing them to provide three months rent to tenants forced to move when a notice of abatement is issued.

The task force also recommends the city enact an inclusionary ordinance of 25 percent affordability for developments of five units or more.

Barr acknowledged that the suggestions of an inclusionary ordinance of 25 percent for the city is high. (Santa Cruz County has a 15 percent requirement; Watsonville doesn't have one.) But, he said, other cities in California have enacted such ordinances. Most of the suggestions the group is making have been enacted in other places, he said. As far as the legality of some of the recommendations, such as giving preference in renting or selling to current residents, Barr said some of the ordinances had been legally challenged in other places, but that the attorneys on the task force felt they were viable.

The task force made several recommendations to the city re-

garding seeking more public funds for housing, investigating the potential for rezoning and land-use changes, modifying existing regulations that restrict construction, and investigating a number of other ways to gain affordable housing in the city. It also recommends that the city take the lead in securing the acquisition of the FEMA trailers for low-cost permanent or interim housing.

For the purposes of its report, the group defined an affordable unit as one that can be rented or purchased by a very low, low or moderate-income household spending no more than 25 percent of its income. Those income levels were set for a family of four at \$16,380 or less, \$16,380-\$26,210, and \$26,210-\$39,310, respectively.