

Watsonville will discuss farm buffer

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WATSONVILLE — After a month of silence on the issue, the agricultural buffer zone will be brought back for public hearing today before the Planning Commission.

The Planning Department has proposed a new buffer policy that would strengthen the city's existing law, which was passed in 1978.

Under the proposal, a minimum 50-foot buffer would be placed between farm land and new development, with an eight-foot fence of either wood or masonry erected to provide a physical separation. Dense vegetation is also proposed.

The buffer is an attempt to reduce the conflicts generated by the encroachment of urban development on existing farms. Farmers say they need the buffer to reduce vandalism and trespassing, and they want to eliminate complaints from neighbors about dust and noise associated with "normal farming practices."

In the recent city election, the buffer became a hot political issue, with the planning commission unable to make a decision on it before the election for lack of a quorum.

Mayor Betty Murphy took a strong stand for a tougher policy, winning the support of local farmers in her successful campaign against Councilman Rex Clark and political newcomer Robert Chacanaca.

The Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau has been at the heart of the call for a tighter policy. President Tom Am Rhein wants a masonry fence with a minimum 50-foot buffer in which no streets, sidewalks or yards could be located.

The current buffer zone policy allows everything except houses in it.

Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture President Scott Johnson has called for a modified buffer that would include streets. While he prefers a case-by-case review by the City Council, Johnson said a 50-foot buffer would be acceptable, as long as anything larger were studied in an environmental impact report.

The issue is expected to reach the City Council for final consideration later this month.