

Plan to cut traffic, congestion gets green light

State-mandated trip-reduction ordinance, unpopular with public officials, business leaders, gets go-ahead from planners

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A plan to control air pollution and traffic congestion in and around Watsonville got the go-ahead from Planning Commissioners last night, but the pro-vote didn't necessarily mean the plan is popular.

"I don't like this plan, I don't like the idea of it at all," said Nita Gonzalez, who heads the Planning Commission, just moments before casting her yes vote along with the

rest.

Only four commissioners were present to consider the state-mandated trip-reduction ordinance that over the next three years will attempt to get more people finding alternatives to commuting to work alone. Stan Nielsen and Joseph Parker were absent; the seat vacated by the death of John Gilford remains unfilled pending City Council approval of a replacement.

California voters in 1990 passed Proposition 111, requiring counties

to implement plans integrating transportation regulations with land-use decisions and air-quality planning. Trip-reduction ordinances, designed to reduce "single-occupant vehicle" trips during peak morning and afternoon traffic hours are how local jurisdictions will comply with the state law.

Gonzalez' displeasure stemmed from her perception of the plan as "one more layer" of bureaucracy. She asked if the state had consid-

ered any other means for dealing with traffic and air quality.

"There are not any other laws coming down the pike to deal with these problems," said Todd Bennett, who was hired by the city to help draft the ordinance.

The trip-reduction plan must also win the City Council's approval, but as passed last night, compliance will be phased in, and will be voluntary for the first two years. It can remain voluntary as long as the ordinance's goals are

met, or a "best effort" to meet the goals can be shown.

The general consensus of those who have helped draft it and who will bear the burden of compliance is to avoid going to a mandatory program. Apart from tightening the screws on local businesses, such a program would be expensive to implement and enforce, planners say.

Watsonville's proposed trip-reduction ordinance provides for

See TRIP / back of section ▶

TRIP

▶ From Page 1

eventual participation by all employers, developers, and owners of school, recreational, commercial, and multi-tenant rental sites. The plan's initial target will be those sites employing 100 or more people. A similar initial participation has been set by the rest of the county jurisdictions, except for the city of Santa Cruz, which is opting for a more stringent threshold of 50 or more employees. Monterey County has not yet determined its figure, but it is anticipated that a 100 to 250 threshold will be set.

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors was to take a trip-reduction ordinance this afternoon.

In Watsonville, there are currently about 40 businesses that fall into the 100-or-more category.

All new developments will have to comply within 30 days of the law's passage.

Those who fail to comply with the provisions of the ordinance, either by meeting the goals or at least trying to, will face misdemeanor citations and penalty fees.

Among the ways businesses can reduce single-car commutes will be to institute car- and van-pooling, shorter work weeks, work-at-home programs, and on-site facilities like showers and lockers that make it more convenient for people to walk or bicycle to work.

Watsonville's trip-reduction plan was modeled on one drafted by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, but tailored to the needs and characteristics of Watsonville's population.

"We don't like it at all. Nobody around the state likes it," Bob Dwyer, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Com-

merce, told the commissioners. He noted that while traffic-management plans in place in southern California "have proved to be very expensive and not very effective, that doesn't change the requirements of the proposition."

Dwyer, also executive director of the Pajaro Valley Transportation Management Association that was set up to help develop and oversee a local plan, said the trip-reduction ordinances being drawn around the county were developed to comply with the state mandates "but at the same time were as lenient as possible in terms of the impact they would have on local business."

Pointing out that Watsonville has the highest number of employers that will have to adhere to the ordinance, is less dense and doesn't have the same traffic problems as other county areas, Dwyer said, "We're trying to make a fit in the Pajaro Valley."

Watsonville's trip-reduction ordinance will apply to all new and existing employers, residential and non-residential developers, and owners of multi-unit rental housing complexes.

The phase-in will have employers of 250 or more people comply by Jan. 31, 1996; employers of 100 to 249 by Jan. 31, 1997, and employers with 10 to 99 people by June 30, 1997.

School, recreational and commercial sites must comply by the June '97 date.

Based on annual review, the mandatory elements can be postponed if employers bring down their number of solo commutes to levels established by the ordinance, or can show they are trying.