

City parks feeling pinch of area's rapid growth

By DAN YOUNG

It's a brisk but sunny Saturday afternoon. The kids are bored with their newest computer game, Dad has just about had it with his favorite college football team, and Mom is itching to get out for a little fresh air.

A day at the park is just what the doctor ordered.

But the youth soccer league has the main park all tied up; picnic spots at the lake are all "reserved" by early morning; and that secret get-away spot out on the edge of town long ago became a parking lot for the newest industrial park.

What Dad wouldn't give to have at his disposal one of those little neighborhood parks.

You know the type: a grassy knoll overlooking a playground area, with a swing and merry-go-round for the youngest, and a small basketball court for the son — a place the whole family can enjoy.

But, alas, neighborhood parks are as scarce as were those "cabbage Patch" dolls back in the Christmas of '83.

Given Watsonville's "growth pattern," it appears that's not an impossible scenario for the city's future.

While Watsonville is nowhere near a "paved parking lot," as some Santa Cruz-area politicians have claimed in the past, many city dwellers have long felt the effect of the city's growth in their leisure time.

For example:

—Try getting a parking spot near Ramsay Park on any given Sunday morning.

—See how long it takes you to get into a pick-up basketball game at the Alianza gym some wintry Saturday afternoon.

—Wait until after noon on a warm summer Saturday or Sunday and then attempt to get a picnic spot at Pinto Lake.

Looking to the future, the city projects a population growth of about 9-10,000 more people by 1990, bringing with it a need for approximately 2,000 more housing units.

And as open space gives way to housing tracts and industrial parks, the demand on recreational facilities increases as the population grows.

Most who have reviewed the situation agree Watsonville must act now — before "growth" chews up all available sites for use in future park and recreational development.

"This is a critical time," Pat Donohue, Watsonville's recreation director, said. "Available land is going to disappear quickly. We'll have a very possible problem in the future if we don't designate sites for parks and recreational use."

But there are problems involved, as a special recreation advisory committee has found out.

The committee (with the help of Mrs. Donohue, city Planning Director Bob Ellenwood and members of the Planning Commission and the Recreation and Parks Commission) is currently drawing up a "recreation element" — an official guideline the City Council will use to help determine future parks and recreational needs.

The members of the commit-

tee are facing some rather sobering facts, as indicated in an initial draft of their "element":

—The city's state-mandated General Plan does not speak specifically to park and recreation needs (the city has a Master Parks Plan, but it has never been formally adopted by the City Council), other than to say that developers should be encouraged to provide areas for open space and discouraged from opting to pay in-lieu — or "bedroom-tax" — fees. Despite such encouragement, most developers have opted for the in-lieu fees nonetheless.

—Increased development in neighborhoods has eliminated many sandlot play areas, and traffic has made it more difficult for children to travel long distances to existing parks.

—Recreational uses compete with business, industry and residential uses for what vacant land is left in the city.

—Additional parks and recreational facilities mean added maintenance responsibilities for the city. That cost must then compete with other city services for a limited number of city dollars.

—Since 1973, it has been the City Council's policy that recreation programs in the city be self-supporting.

—Many recreational programs already turn back potential participants. (For example, there were some 10 teams turned away for the current city league basketball season and there are no facilities available to expand the program.)

—Studies show that Watson-

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ville's population is aging. That presents a special problem for the city's recreation department, which must plan future programs around an older set.

—The city desperately needs more specialized facilities: a pool, more softball diamonds and gymnasiums.

—With the influx of the electronics industry, the recreation department now must deal with a growing number of "shift workers" — those people who will be looking to fill their recreational needs at odd hours.

—And probably most important of all, in the areas where parks are needed the most, suitable vacant public land for park and recreational development is simply not available.

And the numbers game only adds to the problem. According to the advisory committee's initial report:

—National Park and Recreation Assn. (NPRA) standards indicate the Watsonville area needs about 50 more acres dedicated to neighborhood-type parks (there is presently only one park — the 2.7-acre Callaghan site — in Watsonville's Urban Planning Area; under NPRA standards, at least two more neighborhood parks are needed) and about 192 acres for community parks (the city currently has 40 acres — at Ramsay Park and Pinto Lake; NPRA standards indicate a minimum of seven park sites are lacking).

And, although the advisory committee's report does not speak to it directly, many people feel the absence of proper recreational facilities plays a role in the ever-present social problems of the area's youth.

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It appears the city may be in a predicament from which there is no escape. How do you fund and build more parks, when land and money are tight? Funds may become more readily available as the economic picture brightens, of course, but where do you put the parks once the money to build them is available?

Mrs. Donohue and her recreation advisory committee think they have — if nothing else — at

least a partial answer to that question.

School sites.

Within Watsonville's Urban Planning Area, there are 14 school sites, with over 100 acres of open space. Joint school/park development of these playgrounds could be the first step in alleviating the city's recreational problems.

"School sites provide potential ... it's what we're working toward," said Mrs. Donohue.

As an example of potential school-site development, she points to H.A. Hyde Elementary School on Alta Vista Drive, in the middle of the aforementioned parkless Bernardo Community Planning Area.

"There is a big playground there (which gets relatively little use) ... we can work with the people of the neighborhood and tell them 'tell us what you want' ... and we can be kind to the neighborhood (for example, not put in lighted areas, to make sure no 'night-life activities' pop up) ... we'll try to build into the parks the specific desires of the neighborhood."

Bob Peterson, business manager of the Pajaro Valley school district, sees no problem with the district cooperating with the city on such a campaign.

"A share-facilities arrangement we have no problem with," said Peterson. "I don't think there'll be any problem with cooperation, but..."

Ah, the big "but" — and you just know it has to do with money.

"...We have a problem with finances," Peterson continued.

"It takes lots of dollars to improve the facilities, and we don't have that kind of money. We're cutting back on librarians and counselors, so it wouldn't make sense to put a softball field as top priority," he said.

The city would have to provide a good portion of the funding, he said.

"That's a real hard problem," agreed Mrs. Donohue.

"Financing will have to come from building fees, park bond acts and grants. Volunteer labor to help cut down construction costs is also important," she said.

Grants are not easy to come

by these days — requests for state and federal monies by far outnumber funding available, and private groups for tax reasons tend not to contribute to city coffers. (A non-profit "Advocates of Watsonville Parks and Recreation" group is being formed, said Mrs. Donohue, in an effort to alleviate that problem.)

But where there's a will, there's a way — and the renovation project now going on at E.A. Hall Junior High on Bre-wington Avenue is a good example.

The school district and the city in 1981 agreed to the development of a 15-acre prototype park on E.A. Hall grounds — a park that would eventually include three soccer fields, two baseball diamonds, a regulation track, restroom/storage facilities, a concession stand, landscaping and fencing.

Phase I of the project — the construction of the track, one irrigated soccer field, a practice field and perimeter fencing — has been completed, and was financed with a \$25,000 grant from the state and \$33,000 each from the city's special parks fund and school district.

Phase II — the construction of one Little League diamond — received the final go-ahead Tuesday night when the City Council obligated \$7,500 toward the project. The school district has already indicated it will match that figure — to give the Recreation Department the \$15,000 in "other funds" the Pillsbury Company (parent company of Green Giant) required the project receive before it issued a \$25,000 grant. Construction is due to begin this summer.

So the ball is rolling. Once the Little League diamond is in, the National Little League will vacate the Ramsay Park field, which will then be renovated into another softball diamond — helping to fulfill yet another unmet demand.

Another park here, another diamond there — maybe another gymnasium facility in between — and the city is well on its way to providing the recreation facilities its citizens so badly need.

It won't be easy — everyone agrees on that, but the "recreation element," a Mrs. Donohue said, "provides the city with an orderly plan of attack."