

South county farmers protest buffer zone idea

By STEVE STROTH
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Watsonville planning commissioners heard plenty last night about a proposed policy that would establish stricter "buffer zones" between farming operations and new developments.

The Planning Department has come up with a new policy that would call for 50 to 200-foot "buffer zones" with landscaping and walls between all agriculture land and any new buildings. The commission was asked by the City Council to review the proposal and make a recommendation by the council's April 28 meeting.

But the commission postponed that decision, along with half of last night's agenda, because three commissioners, Tony Campos, Luis De La Cruz and Eric Andersson were absent.

Campos and De La Cruz were at a City Council candidate forum. Campos is running for one of three council seats and De La Cruz is his campaign manager.

Ericksson could not be reached this morning to comment about his absence.

Farmers gave the four commissioners present an earful. Basically, farmers want plenty of distance between their fields and the ever-nearer residential and commercial building that has pushed the city's boundaries up against its surrounding agricultural lands.

Farmers say their crops are vandalized and pulverized by people living near their land or traveling over it to get somewhere else.

"We need some kind of positive barrier, and the stronger the better," farmer Jim Rider said. "Planting alone won't do it."

Tom AmRein, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, said the only complaint the local farmers have with the proposed limits called for by the Planning Department is that they could limit the future use of farm land.

Instead of using the type of crop as the factor that determines how wide the buffer should be, he said, the city should examine the density and use of the proposed buildings to determine how far they should be from the farms.

Developers aren't opposed to having gaps between their land and the farmers' land, but they are asked for smaller distances and less sacrifice of their own lands for open space.

Zane Ota and Andy Moore, partners in a townhouses complex on Crestview Drive that borders agricultural land, said they understood the farmers' concerns, but asked for a compromise.

"For one side to have to put up the full buffer, I don't think that's justifiable," Moore said. He suggested the farmers give up some of their land to create the buffer.

Farmer Bill Ringe said that farmers shouldn't have to give up any of their land. Any new development must plan for existing problems, including close proximity to farms.

Another concern by developers is that the 50-foot minimum include street and parking lot areas, but the Planning Department is recommending against that.

The Planning Commission will take up the issue again at a special study session next month and is scheduled to decide the matter at its June 1 meeting.