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Battle over county growth rate looms

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The battle lines are being drawn between Santa Cruz County supervisors, who want to stem growth in the county's unincorporated areas, and Watsonville city fathers, who are covetously eyeing county property on the outskirts of town onto which they would like to expand.

In preliminary discussions for setting the county's 1988 growth rate, supervisors yesterday expressed awe and some dismay over Watsonville's estimated 4 percent population growth for 1986.

Growth projections made by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments show Watsonville swelling from 28,550 residents this year to 34,830 by 2005. But Supervisor Dan Forbus said he thought the Watsonville population was more likely to double in the next 18 years.

Assistant Planning Director Tom Burns concurred, saying other projections show Watsonville residents are likely to number 58,000 by the turn of the century.

To accommodate that growth and to acquire land on which to build new housing, Watsonville Planning Director Bud Carney made an appearance before the board to ask the supervisors to yield county land on the fringes of the city to the city.

"We're asking for you to look at some lands around Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley, not prime agricultural lands, that could be annexed to the city of Watsonville," Carney said. "We'd like to annex on an incremental basis, with a five-, 10- or 15-year time frame. We need to develop an agreement between the city and the county as to what is really prime agricultural land."

"Prime agricultural land" is protected from development and conversion to other uses

under Measure J, authored by Supervisor Gary Patton.

Patton has recently accused the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency of making sly plans to serve vast new quantities of residential or industrial customers.

In a Nov. 19 letter to Richard Hendry, an attorney who serves on the agency's technical advisory committee, Patton suggests that a proposal for the agency to buy 20,000 acre-feet of water per year from the San Felipe water project means that the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency is gearing up to serve new residential or industrial customers, even though current regulations prohibit it from doing so.

"I can see no reason whatsoever to import water — unless such water is to be used as a standby supply for future municipal and industrial growth," Patton said in his letter.

Patton quizzed Carney

closely yesterday as to how much residential land remains to be built on within Watsonville's city limits.

Carney said the city could keep building until 1993 without bursting its seams, but emphasized again that Watsonville wants to plan for annexation.

"There is as much concern in Watsonville to preserve agricultural lands as there is in the county," said Carney. "But we believe that the need to grow and the need to preserve the environment can all be accomplished."

As the county yields its land to cities, it loses its jurisdiction over growth on that land. A proposal to incorporate Aptos as a city would also reduce the supervisors' control over growth.

In further discussion of the 1988 growth rate, which will not be set until March, the supervisors fell into debate over how many building permits should be allotted for the first quarter

of next year.

Assistant Planning Director Burns said the supervisors should create a permit allotment for the period before the growth rate is set.

The supervisors haggled inconclusively over what that number should be, and will set it on Dec. 8 after receiving further information from the Planning Department.

Some supervisors were concerned that building in the unincorporated areas of the county may have exceeded the 1 percent growth rate the supervisors set for 1987, because "carryover" permits from previous years are being used.

While the supervisors allocated only 468 building permits for 1987, 571 had been issued by Nov. 1, according to Planning Department statistics. There are 1,417 carryover permits available from previous years, which could, in the opinion of Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, pose

"a threat" to the whole concept of growth management.

Cucchiara said he was satisfied, however, that the supervisors were adequately managing the growth rate, although state Department of Finance statistics show that with a supervisor-imposed growth limit of 1.5 percent in 1986, the population in unincorporated areas still grew by 2.2 percent.

"I think in all fairness that growth management is not population control," said Cucchiara. "It regulates the amount of built environment in any one year... Our purpose is to pace the rate of change in the community. There is no way to challenge the fact that the present system does a very good job of metering the change from a natural environment to a built environment."

The supervisors will not set the 1988 growth rate until they receive a report on "fair-share housing" from AMBAG in February.