

Mid-county: An area in search of

3-11-71 Green Sheet

By MARY BARNETT

The mid-county area has an identity problem, in the opinion of Walter J. Monasch, Santa Cruz County's new planning director.

"Watsonville is a place that has found its image," he said. "So has Bonnie Doon, Scotts Valley, and Rio Del Mar, each in its own way. But much of the mid-county is in search of an image.

"It doesn't know what it wants to be or why. That more than anything else is the problem of the mid-county."

This analysis comes from a man who is not only recognized as one of America's top planners, but is himself a resident of the mid-county. Monasch lives in the Crest Apartments on a cliff in Capitola, overlooking Monterey Bay.

The planner brims with health, confidence and vigor. In his mid-forties, he has thinning blonde hair, blue eyes, an amiable smile, and a strong and determined-looking jaw.

He looks successful, and he is. On his wall is a photograph of California's former governor Edmund G. (Pat) Brown. Monasch explains he worked for Brown as the first director of the state Department of Housing and Community Development in 1965-66.

After that he was a member of a private planning consulting firm in Chicago, until his appointment to the Santa Cruz County planning post upon the recent resignation of Bert Muhly. Monasch is president of the American Institute of Planners.

He has spent most of his professional life in California—in San Jose, Alameda and Sacramento.

Maybe it is just his positive nature, but Monasch is genuinely

hopeful for the mid-county's future despite the problems he sees.

"I never consider anything hopeless," he said. "I am a perennial optimist."

For beneficial change, he thinks three conditions are required:

—Recognition there are problems; "sometimes this is the most difficult thing of all;"

—Some agreement as to the direction of change, and

—A lot of courage, to get on with it and do something about it.

"These elements do exist in this county," Monasch said, but added, "Whether they exist in all the various areas, I'm not sure."

The two exceptions Monasch sees to the mid-county's "identity crisis" are Rio del Mar and the older part of Capitola. He thinks these areas have found themselves: Rio del Mar as the upper middle-class suburb oriented to the golf course and the bay, and Capitola as a picturesque, historical resort and art center.

Rio and the Aptos area in general, he thinks is being developed in a "fairly orderly" manner.

"There is some concept behind it," he said. "Whether it should grow at all or not is an issue. But it is growing in a reasonably orderly way."

But in other parts of the mid-county the story is different, he has found.

"One developer I talked to said he is leery of one part of the mid-county area where he was thinking of putting in a development," Monasch reported. "He said there was no logic to it. There were \$50,000 houses next to \$10,000 houses. He couldn't find a handle to it."

He quickly added he doesn't

mean there should be absolute uniformity, because that's dull.

"But there should be some relationship to things, some sequence. An area shouldn't look like somebody shook a pepper shaker over it, and all sorts of things just dropped out."

He sees Live Oak as an example of an area that "just happens".

He isn't sure just now what should be done about it, but he is confident something can be done.

Where there is a will, he finds, radical changes can come quickly.

But he admits that the ups and downs, the unexpected contrasts, are "part of the charm and excitement of the mid-county area." How to retain the charm, and balance growth is the tough problem.

How about low-cost housing, which has been called a primary need in Santa Cruz County? Does Monasch think it is too much of a contrast in a nice neighborhood?"

Not necessarily.

"I would be opposed to a massive low-cost housing project anywhere," he said. "Such projects only accentuate the problems of the poor, rather than resolving them. They just add to the boiling pot."

The new trend, he said, is to scattered developments. He thinks they should be placed in areas where the general economic level is within the reach of those living in the subsidized housing.

He doesn't see putting low-cost units at Pajaro Dunes, where wealthy San Franciscans disport themselves on the weekends.

"But in Aptos, there are a large number of locations where various units could fit in," he

said. "There are more areas into which low-cost units would fit than not."

It would be just as bad—even worse—to put low-cost housing next to the dump or the sewer plant than to place it on the Gold Coast, in Monasch's opinion.

An apartment dweller himself, Monasch is a believer in multiple housing for many people. "Not everybody wants to mow the lawn," he said.

Once, Monasch pointed out, single-family housing was considered the "end-all and be-all".

"If you didn't live in a single-family home, you weren't supposed to be a taxpayer," he said. "That's all hogwash. Renters pay through their landlords."

"Young people need housing before they settle down. Old people often don't need single family housing. We shouldn't put all people in one category. We should provide alternatives."

As for low-cost housing causing slums, Monasch doesn't believe that the cost of housing alone determines whether or not it is a slum, any more than the density factor (single-family or multiple) alone makes for a slum.

"Slums are caused by many

things," he said. "It could be a bad traffic pattern, or bad schools."

Much discussion of the mid-county's future has centered on incorporation, but Monasch is not sure incorporation alone can create the identity he thinks the mid-county needs.

The mid-county's only incorporated city, Capitola, does have an identity in its central area, Monasch said: "There's a there there".

But much of the rest of the mid-county he thinks merits the description of her native Oakland by poet Gertrude Stein: "There's no there there."

What about zoning as therapy for the mid-county's identity crisis?

Monasch sees zoning as chiefly a negative tool, more designed to keep bad things from happening than to make good things happen. He would rather help make good things happen.

This, he said, can be done by working with a developer on planned-unit developments for most larger areas.

"I hope we can establish a framework for a developer to do something creative," he said.

"With this zoning and police power approach, the minimum becomes the standard. I hope we can try for excellence."

How would this work?

"We can offer the developer a bonus. For a particularly good plan, maybe for saving open space areas, we could offer a bonus in the form of higher density. If the plan showed a particularly good land use, maybe 10 per cent wouldn't be enough. We would like to challenge the developer to do his best."

Such planned-unit developments needn't be giants. They could be relatively small in area—six acres or maybe even smaller.

"In a renewal project, if the parking is put underground, we could add a bonus in density. If there were a roofed deck, or a pool on the roof, we could offer another bonus. It will pay off."

What Monasch would like to avoid is what he calls the "Santa Clara Valley syndrome"—vast areas of lots of equal sizes in a characterless suburb.

"Suppose you had 10 acres," he said. "You could chop it up neatly into 50 units. But you could also put 50 units all in one building, and leave the rest of the nine and a half acres free, in open space, and wouldn't that be exciting?"

"Or you could do something in between. Maybe some of the 50 units could be in townhouse clusters. Or there could be one tall building with 20 units, and 30 units in townhouses. There is an unlimited number of options."

He swung his chair around and pointed out the window, across the courthouse lawn, to the Villa Nueva, a posh downtown Santa Cruz apartment house.

"If there were 50 of those buildings in a mass, they would be tenements," he said. "As it is, it's great."

"It isn't the building that's the key—it's the total environment."