

Hearing on airport turns into shouting match

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A public hearing at the Veterans Hall in Watsonville last night, which had been called to discuss the development of an airport land use commission, turned into a dogfight over whether the airport should remain open or be closed and the land used for affordable housing.

About 100 people attended the

hearing, which was a joint meeting between the Watsonville City Council and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. The issue on the agenda was whether a land use commission that would review proposed projects for land around the airport should be established, and if so, what form it should take.

But the direction of the meeting changed course fairly quickly, with

speakers coming to the microphone to speak for or against the airport itself.

The 100-person crowd seemed fairly evenly divided between the two camps. Those who wanted housing placed on the 330-acre airport held signs reading "Why Should We Subsidize Rich People's Toys," and "No Podemos Vivir En Aeroplanos (We can't live in airplanes)," and both sides heckled

speakers they disagreed with and thunderously applauded those they liked.

The tension level between the two groups soared when activist Frank Bardacke, a teacher at Radcliff Adult School, moved the microphone, saying he didn't think it was appropriate for the speakers to have their backs to the audience. Airport supporters yelled at him to move it back, while the

anti-airport crowd applauded the move. Later, airport supporters tried to move the microphone back, and were met by anti-airport people who set it back where they wanted it.

The confrontation took on a racial tone when one speaker, Guillermina Ramirez, began speaking in accented English and was told to speak English by audience member Louise Blanchard.

After others made similar remarks, Ramirez said that if they didn't like her English, she would speak in Spanish, which she did. Councilman Oscar Rios translated for her.

Ramirez talked about the problems associated with finding adequate, affordable housing and the difficulty in finding good jobs in

See AIRPORT page 7 ►

✓ Watsonville - Growth

AIRPORT

► From page 1

the city. Many people are living in cars, she said.

"Why don't you live in your airplanes and see how you like it," she said.

Only a handful of the nearly two dozen speakers actually spoke about the airport commission, expressing a variety of concerns that ranged from fears that the city would lose control over planning to worries that aviation interests wouldn't be adequately represented.

The county has been mandated by state law either to establish the commission or make a finding that there is no need for one. State law allows the county two options in forming a commission: have an existing agency, such as a transportation commission, double as an airport land use commission, or set up a completely separate commission.

The matter came before the Board of Supervisors last month, and county staff recommended the formation of a separate airport land use commission. Later, after Supervisor Gary Patton pulled the item off the agenda and talked to staff, staff recommended holding a public hearing before the board take action.

According to the law, if an existing agency is to double as an airport land use commission, two of

Register-Pajaronian Thursday, June 14, 1990 - 7

the members need to have expertise in aviation. If the agency lacks those members, it must add them. A separate land use commission must be made up of seven members, two each representing the county, cities in the county and aviation interests, with one member selected by the initial six.

Proposed projects for the area surrounding the airport would be reviewed by the board to see if they are compatible in light of the safety and noise problems being near an airport might pose. The decision of the commission could be overruled by the city or county, depending on whether the project falls within the city or the county, by a two-thirds vote of the council or board.

The exact jurisdiction of the airport land use committee could be as much as a two-mile radius from the airport, which includes a large portion of the city, from the area immediately surrounding the airport all the way to downtown.

Rebecca J. Garcia, the president of the Pajaro Valley League of United Latin American Citizens, said LULAC believes it would be "a great mistake" to appoint another body to make land-use decisions for Watsonville, especially since LULAC thinks affordable housing should be developed in the Buena Vista-Calabasas area near the airport. She suggested a commission made up of members of the Watsonville City Council and the Board of Supervisors.

Tom Harris, a former United Airlines pilot, said it was crucial that people with solid aviation experience sit on any committee formed.

Another airport user said an airport land use commission was crucial in order to avoid approval of developments that would be unsafe to build near the airport.

After the public comment portion of the 3½-hour meeting closed, members of the council and the Board of Supervisors emphasized the need for the city and the council to work together on decision-making and the formation of the commission. Several said they were reluctant to hand power over to an appointed body that could only be overruled by a two-thirds vote.

Since the county is the lead agency in the matter, supervisors took action on it, asking for the city, county and airport staff to work together to come up with some suggestions, which will be presented to the board at its first meeting in August.

Rios said that while the meeting had been called on the specific question of the land use committee, the boisterous division over the airport brought up issues that needed to be addressed.

But, he said, "I don't want us to leave his room with that bitterness inside of us, like it's 'us and them.' I don't think that's the way it is here."