

Groups focus on 1990 census

Minorities typically under-counted, says councilman

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7-23-89

WATSONVILLE — The monumental task of counting everyone in the country for the 1990 census will begin next April, but locally the planning is already under way to get a complete count, especially among the large minority population in the Pajaro Valley.

Leading the effort to get the best data possible are such diverse groups as the League of United Latin-American Citizens and the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments.

"I can't think of anything more important at this time," said Rebecca Garcia, president of the Pajaro Valley chapter of LULAC. "It will affect our representation at the local, federal and state level, reapportionment, our funding from the state and federal governments and locally, it will affect our district elections. It needs to be a priority."

The federal government has taken a census every 10 years for the past 200 years. It's hoped this year's information will get a better count of the homeless population, minority population, overcrowding in housing, income levels in each community and employment, according to a brochure published by the U.S. Census Bureau.

City Councilman Dennis Osmer has asked the Watsonville City Council to appoint a multi-faceted group of people to form a "complete count committee" whose aim will be to encourage cooperation from all sectors of the community. He wants to fund the group's effort

with \$3,000 from city coffers.

"I've heard from our Finance Department that one uncounted person costs us \$50 a year in lost revenue," Osmer said. "Over 10 years it's a good chunk of money."

"We know that historically minorities have been under-counted. Just in terms of history we need to have that information, but we also need it for state and federal (funding) and for good planning," he said.

Osmer's proposed committee includes representatives from LULAC, the Filipino community, Japanese American Citizens League, Hispanic Affairs Committee of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, the chamber itself, Watsonville Frozen Food Processors, Association of Watsonville Area Seniors and Farm Bureau.

Celia Organista, the LULAC member heading the census effort, said the challenge will be to get a full count, especially among undocumented workers and immigrant families who share housing.

"We've known for five, six years that the Latino population is way over 50 percent (in Watsonville). It's time to set the record straight," Organista said.

The last census in 1980 placed the Latino population in Watsonville at 48.9 percent of the total. Organista said she thinks that figure is way off.

"You can't walk through Watsonville and not tell me it's not way off," she said. "Grants, funds, it's all based on the census. If you don't

have the right stats you're constantly getting less than you deserve."

Fear and mistrust of government are two of the biggest obstacles that must be overcome to get an accurate count, she said.

"Unfortunately, a lot of people have lost trust in government, especially the federal government," Organista said. "It's not just the undocumented workers that cringe when asked to open their doors. Certainly, they have more to fear. But the lack of trust is across the board."

Organista said her personal experience is that the U.S. Census Bureau doesn't make much of an effort to get accurate information. "I've lived here 24 years and never once received a census form to fill out," she said.

LULAC's effort is countywide and Organista said she's enlisted the help of Santa Cruz City Councilman John Laird in forming a committee in Santa Cruz.

Stephen Williams, AMBAG program manager for comprehensive planning, said the association will form a regional committee to reach out to various groups in the community to achieve a complete count.

"Our purpose will be to use various community, ethnic, business and religious organizations to encourage people to fill out the census forms," he said.

AMBAG covers Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, which had a combined population of 579,209 in 1989, based on a state Department of Finance estimate. In all likelihood, AMBAG will also coordinate the census effort with San Benito County, he said.