

GREENBELT

Watsonville
- Growth



BOB JOHNSON

AND GROWTH

Watsonville Puts the Squeeze on Farmland

By Bob Johnson

Watsonville city planners have proposed the most ambitious urban expansion envisioned in this county since Santa Cruz city leaders, more than two decades ago, hoped to build a suburban outpost on the grazing lands of the north coast. Residential development would be extended to the east to Corralitos Creek, nearly a mile of farmland beyond the current Watsonville city limits. To the west, the urban population would spill beyond Highway 1 until it reached the natural barrier of Harkins Slough. A network of rivers, creeks, sloughs and lagoons on the outskirts of town would be used to form a greenbelt that would protect the farmlands beyond this expanded urban center.

This dramatic and controversial proposal to devour hundreds of acres of the most blessed farmland on the earth comes out of dire necessity: The City of Watsonville is virtually out of room and the population continues to grow at a rate faster than anywhere else in Santa Cruz County—under current zoning, all available land within the city would be developed by the early 1990s. The population of the entire region—including Freedom to the north and Pajaro to the south—is expected to increase from 45,960 to somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000 residents. No one knows where these people will live.

"Continued attempts to preserve 'prime' agricultural land close to the City's center by 'leap-frogging' over and around that land are economically impractical and result in cumulative environmental damage of a much

greater magnitude," wrote Planning Director Bud Carney in proposing that the next Watsonville General Plan include development of farmland adjacent to the city. "Staff therefore recommends that the [general plan] committee consider elimination of agricultural land preservation as a high priority within the city limits and in those areas adjacent to the city limits where residential use would be logical."

The farmers of the Pajaro Valley—already irritated by a number of recent developments approved by the city—have expressed strong reserva-

tions about the greenbelt proposal. Mayor Betty Murphy is anxious about the amount of agricultural land that would be developed. But, despite her overwhelming election last year, Murphy has come up on the short end of many major land use controversies before the Watsonville City Council. The plan, however, would require development of land now controlled by the county and would undoubtedly reawaken the bitter conflict between environmentalists in the north county and pro-development forces in Watsonville.

When the prospective developers of a 26-lot subdivision on Brewington Avenue on the edge of town came to the Watsonville City Council for final approval last month they were apprehensive about the consideration they might be asked to show the farmer of an apple orchard just across the road from their new development. City law requires that new developments be separated from the farms of the Pajaro Valley by an 8-foot wall and a heavily planted 15-foot-wide buffer. Compliance with the law would require that an inconvenient curve be

built into the extension of Brewington Avenue. And, more important, the buffer would force the Brewington Associates to scale down their development by eliminating two valuable units.

As the Brewington Associates pled their case to the council, controversy over developments near farms had been raging since December 1986, when Pajaro Valley farmers were galvanized into action by approval of 27 new townhouse units adjacent to an apple orchard. "There's a certain amount of dust, noise and spray involved in farming," said John Lukrich, who had grown apples around Watsonville for more than three decades and would now have new neighbors to worry about. "I don't want to have to be responsible if it bothers people."

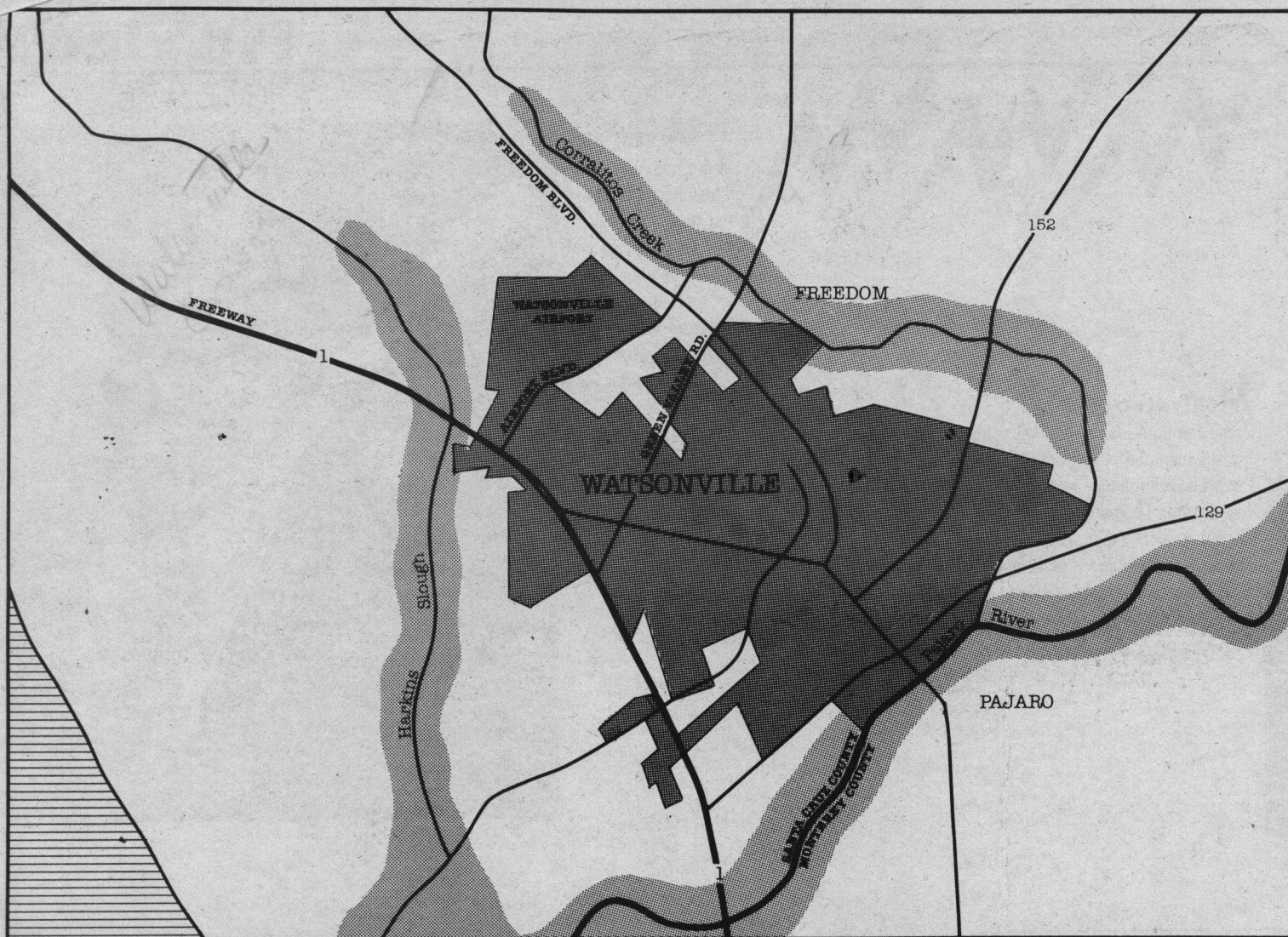
The Farm Bureau of Santa Cruz County asked that agriculture be protected by requiring walls up to 12 feet tall and buffers up to 200 feet wide between new developments and existing farms. City Councilwoman Betty Murphy took up the cause and made it the most important issue in her campaign for the mayoral election last May, which she won by a nearly 2-1 margin over four-term City Councilmember Rex Clark.

After months of compromises, a delegation of farmers went to Watsonville City Hall one night last fall hoping that an agreement they had reached with the chamber of commerce—to accept a 50-foot buffer—would become city policy. The farmers were stunned and angered as Murphy was able to gain the support of only Councilwoman Gwen Carrol while the majority whittled their protection down to a scant 15 feet.



Pajaro Valley County Supervisor Sherry Mehl and Watsonville Mayor Betty Murphy wonder what development will do to the valley.

BOB JOHNSON



A draft suggestion for the Watsonville General Plan would extend development far beyond the city limits (dark gray) to a proposed greenbelt (light gray)

The discussion of the Brewington Avenue development last month was the first test of the buffer policy and it involved new construction on another side of the same 24-acre orchard farmed by Lukrich that had first sparked the controversy.

City Manager John Radin suggested that a way around the inconvenience of a crooked Brewington, and around the Associates' lost units, would be to eliminate the buffer altogether. "Although I agree with buffers and everything, I think we should just put the fence in as a buffer rather than put in 15 feet of landscaping that's going to come out in four or five years," said Radin, pointing out that the owner of the orchard, which Lukrich leases, would like to annex and develop his land. "It seems foolish to put a buffer in for such a short time when we know what's going in on the other side." The council was convinced—with Murphy again supported only by Carrol—and Brewington Associates will build their 26 units with only an 8-foot wall as a barrier from the orchard.

City Manager John Radin was the first to suggest that residential development will extend far beyond the eastern city limits when he said during a discussion of the buffer last June, "Salsipuedes and Corralitos Creeks will eventually be the buffer."

Between those two creeks and the City of Watsonville lie hundreds of acres of farmland that have already been the subject of fierce development controversies. Between the creeks and the city is the 54-acre apple orchard that Tony Franich was ready to annex and develop until environmentalists took him to court and won. Just south of the Franich property is a 20-acre lettuce farm that the CDM development group

eyes as the site for 140 to 150 housing units. And the 24-acre orchard that John Lukrich will farm—until the property owner is allowed to develop—is also between the city limits and Salsipuedes and Corralitos Creeks.

More than half a year after Radin's precocious remark Salsipuedes and Corralitos Creeks emerged as the eastern boundary of the expanded urban center proposed by Planning Director Carney in his controversial memo. Development would be bounded on the south by the Pajaro River and, to the north and west, by Corralitos Lagoon and Harkins Slough. If medium-density standards were followed, according to Carney, residential development in this expanded urban center over the next 17 years would use up 446 acres of agricultural land.

The rivers, creeks, lagoons and sloughs would provide natural barriers around which a greenbelt would be built to contain the city and protect the more outlying farms. "Located in this greenbelt could be recreation facilities, a pedestrian and bike-way system, and eventually a fixed route transit system of some type," Carney wrote. "Such a greenbelt would serve as an attractive and useful transition area between urban and agricultural uses, clearly delineating that area where urban uses are to be encouraged from that where they are to be prohibited."

A major purpose of the greenbelt would be to prevent small islands of development from cropping up in the far outlying areas, as has already happened off Green Valley and Amesti Roads near Pinto Lake a few miles north of Watsonville.

"Agricultural land on the periphery would be protected from encroachment by urban uses and the attendant impacts of such settlement patterns,"

Carney wrote. The price of this protection, however, would involve giving up values that have long been at the heart of this small town and accepting new realities: "Watsonville is no longer a small agricultural town. It has become a small city with a diversified economic base. Preserving agricultural land is a worthy goal, but

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—Bud Carney

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Most of the farmers in the Pajaro Valley lease, rather than own, their fields. There is little they could do should the landowners succeed in gaining political approval to develop, just as there is already little they can do about the rising rents on their fields caused by just the possibility that development will expand into the farmlands. As a group the farmers of the Pajaro Valley have not, as yet, embraced development to the creeks and sloughs as the way to protect agriculture, just as they have not taken the historic decision to build a city on irreplaceable

soil as inspiration that the practice should be continued.

"That proposal has us very concerned—we don't feel that development should be jumping over the freeway," said Jess Brown, general manager of the local farm bureau. "We feel there is a better direction to develop."

Last month Watsonville flower grower Frank Siri—farm bureau vice-president and its representative on the general plan—made the farmers' apprehensions public at a committee discussion of Carney's proposal. Siri admitted that farming near Watsonville faces formidable problems regardless of what the city does. "I don't see anything saving agriculture in this area," Siri said, according to the *Watsonville Register-Pajaronian*. "Eventually, it's going to go." But Siri also questioned the protection offered by the greenbelt, asking, "Will it stop anything or is it just there until you want to grow again?" And he also expressed alarm that portions of the proposal, which recommend downgrading ag land preservation near the city, mean that the farms are no longer to be a high priority for Watsonville.

The farm bureau will continue to keep a watchful eye in the weeks ahead as the city council moves toward adoption of a new general plan and the farmers appear to have the support of at least some city hall leaders.

When councilmember Dennis Osmer first saw the greenbelt plan he reacted, "It sounds like we're saying agriculture is dead so let's forget about it. Maybe it's time to start thinking about growth management rather than just reacting to growth."

Murphy has also been skeptical of the ambitious proposal, saying, "I like the idea of a buffer but I'm concerned about where the greenbelt would be." The emphasis on high-density

apartments for the remaining undeveloped acres in the city, another suggestion in Carney's memo, also brought a reaction from Murphy, who said, "That's not the ambience of Watsonville."

The farmers, however, had had Murphy's strong support in the past and found it did them little good in battles with developers. The strongest protection for Pajaro Valley agriculture may come, ironically, from environmentalist local politicians who are elected by voters from the other end of the county, and who have little contact and few friends among the farmers.

One night last November the Watsonville City Council and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors came together at the Watsonville Seniors Center for their first attempt in years to make peace. The history of lawsuits, both threatened and filed, by the county over pro-development practices at Watsonville City Hall has left a reservoir of ill will on both ends of the county. The joint session was sparked by the hope that the city's desire for more land and the county's interest in more moderate-income housing could be the basis of a deal.

Watsonville area Supervisor Sherry Mehl offered some advice—largely lost in an evening of long speeches—to the other south county representatives: "You need to look at your attitude toward agriculture on issues like the buffer to understand why you have a pro-development image." Before her election Mehl shared the view of many in the south county that environmentalists have banned development on many Pajaro Valley properties that are not really suitable for farming. Although Mehl still often finds herself in the minority on the more environmentally-oriented board of supervisors, her word of caution to the Watsonville leaders likely stems from a sense of realism about land-use politics.

Development of the lands beyond Watsonville's city limits would require approval by the board of supervisors unless the property owners move to annex into the city. Annexation would have to be approved by a body representing all area local governments and that body, too, is now controlled by the environmentalists. And even a shift in the political balance would leave the plan to develop the farmlands vulnerable to lawsuits based on strong state laws designed to save agricultural land.

Mehl is withholding a final opinion until the city adopts a new general plan but she is already skeptical about the expansionist proposal. "The idea of a greenbelt appeals to me but I'm not sure this proposal is the best," she said. "Unfortunately a lot of the prime agricultural land is between Watsonville and the freeway. If they are thinking of developing to the freeway, and even west of it, I don't think that's a good idea."

Santa Cruz area Supervisor Gary Patton is more blunt in his criticism of the proposal. "If I can understand it, it's artfully packaged to call it a greenbelt," said Patton. "It looks like the planning director saw that the city is running out of land, proposed to build on the neighboring farms and call the rest a greenbelt. I hope the people of Watsonville denounce it."