

Fate of farm land dominates growth issue

By DAN FITCH
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Thirty-four city officials gathered last night to discuss a growth plan for Watsonville's future, and they ran into "that question" again.

One form of the question goes like this: How does the city grow without destroying agricultural land?

Another form of the question goes like this: How can the city grow if the county will not permit agricultural land to be annexed?

The question was not answered last night, but a new strategy for addressing it was proposed.

"I think we ought to plan like Gary Patton doesn't exist," said Councilman Vido Deretich, referring to the Santa Cruz County supervisor who gets most of the credit, or blame, for the restrictive growth policies of the county.

"We have to plan for Watsonville in the year 2005," said Councilman Tony Campos, "regardless of whether Gary Patton wants to hold us back."

Members of the Planning Commission, City Council, Design Review Commission, General Plan Steering Committee, and the police and fire departments met at the Watsonville Senior Center to discuss the recently released General Plan preliminary draft.

No action or recommendations were approved — it was a "study session" — but the meeting did generate fresh and interesting comments regarding how the city will, or can, grow between now and the year 2005.

And no, Patton, author of Measure J, the county's growth-control initiative approved by voters, did not attend the meeting.

Nevertheless, Patton's aura seemed to surround certain parts of the discussion, such as talk about which directions growth might take.

The Planning Commission has estimated that all land zoned for residential development would be used up in four or five years, and the General Plan committee projects that the population within the city

limits may reach 35,000 (it is now 28,550) and the population within the Planning Area may reach 62,000 (it is now 46,000) by the turn of the century.

Some at the meeting expressed skepticism at the numbers.

Councilman Dennis Osmer asked how the population will grow to such a size if the city is unable to annex any land for housing within its "sphere of influence."

"These population estimates may not be realistic when the

city of Watsonville can't even successfully annex the Franich property," said Osmer, speaking of the 70-plus acres on East Lake Avenue the city has been prevented from annexing so far by legal action by environmental groups. "The sphere of influence seems to rest on the premise that we have control over all these lands."

Planning Director Bud Carney countered by saying that the political climate could change.

"In four years there could be
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a completely different political picture," Carney said, "and we're looking 17, 18, 19 years ahead."

At about that time Deretich and Campos made their references to Patton.

The discussion then moved to the proposed General Plan growth strategy that has generated the most publicity. The strategy, first released in a memo by Carney and the Planning Commission, calls for a "greenbelt" area around the city that would separate urban and agricultural land.

The Planning Commission hopes such a greenbelt would promote orderly growth within the city, but the idea has farmers worried.

Although comments from the public were not allowed last night, the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau issued a release to the meeting and to the media.

"A proposed greenbelt would just exist until you (the city) need to expand again," the Farm Bureau said.

The strategy also calls for the development of 320 housing units just west of Highway 1, a proposition that got City Manager John Radin out of his seat.

"The land is ideal to build on, it's not prime (agricultural), it's not good for anything," Radin said. "But you would have to run a pipe all the way to the ocean to build there, because unless you do you'll be flooding everything west of Beach Road. It's an extremely expensive proposition just to build 300 houses."

Talk also turned to the heart of the city. Mayor Betty Murphy said the General Plan draft did not make "as firm a commitment" to the downtown area as the 1969 General Plan did and said she hoped a "strong statement" urging downtown development could be added to the plan.

That drew a strong reaction from Campos.

"It (the old General Plan) made a real strong statement last time and we ended up with empty buildings," Campos said. "We have to be realistic and see what we can put in there (downtown) that will work, like offices."

City officials will hold one more study session early in March, and the General Plan will be the topic of discussion at the Town Hall Meeting also in March. The dates have not been chosen yet.