

Watsonville prepares to implement smart-growth initiative

By **KURTIS ALEXANDER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — The desk of John Doughty, the development director of the county's fastest-growing city, is brimming with paperwork — among it, plans to install sewer systems, expand police programs, build sidewalks and provide countless other services in the undeveloped reaches of Watsonville.

"Fifty percent of my floor area is covered with garbage," he said, observing the piles of documents amassing in his office. "There's a lot of work to do."

City officials like Doughty are preparing to carry out the directive handed to them by voters last November, known as Measure U, which calls for the expansion of city limits into more rural county lands.

With more than 7,000 people per square mile, Watsonville is the most densely populated city in the county and, to accommodate a rising population, officials say the city must grow outward.

"We get a little defensive when we're challenged for having too little density," Doughty noted, recognizing that in many areas of the state, increasing inner-city density is the trend, and growth a dirty word.

Measure U, which officials say will begin implementation in 2005, is an unusual animal

in the world of growth politics. Having garnered 62 percent voter support, the plan has pacified a wide variety of interest groups, ranging from anti-growth farmers to pro-growth developers.

The 25-year plan calls for the annexation of 400 acres of county land into the city limits, for the sake of 2,000 new homes and at least half as many new jobs. Land west of Highway 1 and north of the city, though, will remain undeveloped, under the voter-approved measure.

"It answers the question of how do you accommodate growth while preserving agricultural and environmentally sensitive land," said Assistant City Manager Marcela Tavantzis. "This is a consensus plan unequaled."

In preparation for Measure U's implementation, city officials must update the general plan, a legally binding development strategy. Only after the general plan is updated — a process that will include six months of public meetings and even more at City Hall — can the city move forward with expansion prescribed by Measure U.

In the meantime, Doughty, Tavantzis and other city officials are wading through stacks of maps, projections and blueprints, theorizing how they'll undertake the growth.

"Should we relocate fire stations? ... What do

we do about sewers, water systems, parks?" wondered Doughty aloud.

Also before the general plan is updated, the city can usher through at least one of the annexations plotted by Measure U. The city had sought to annex a mostly industrial tract along Highway 1, known as the Manabe/Burgstrom parcel, long before the creation of Measure U, so much of the annexation work is already complete.

The city intends to proceed with the other annexations in tandem, officials say. Annexation is traditionally a long and cumbersome process, and while there is strong public support for city expansion, officials hope to move quickly on a packaged annexation process.

Development of the land after annexation, however, will not take place concurrently, but at separate times during a 20- to 25-year period, noted Doughty.

"We don't want it all at once," he said, saying the city needs time to carefully prepare services in the new areas.

The other areas to be annexed, as proposed in Measure U, are 340 acres in the Buena Vista neighborhood north of the airport, 65 acres surrounding Atkinson Lane south of the city and 4 acres in the southerly Villages neighborhood.

The annexations are contingent on winning consent from the Local Agency Formation Com-

mission, the agency charged by the state to review annexation efforts.

"We look at service issues and development patterns," said Pat McCormick, LAFCO's executive officer in Santa Cruz.

How planned growth will affect the agricultural community, he said, will play into the decision of whether Watsonville's expansion is approved.

LAFCO, which has often opposed annexations when there is protest, did not take a position on Measure U last November. But McCormick said there appears to be an unprecedented amount of support for the measure.

Interest groups like Action Pajaro Valley, which have long rallied support for Measure U, have been conferring with LAFCO and continue to do so, to ensure that the popular growth plan will not face bureaucratic obstacles.

"We're working to support the city," said Lisa Dobbins, executive director of Action Pajaro Valley.

However, not everyone is supporting the city's implementation of Measure U.

Working against the process and standing by the 38 percent who voted against Measure U is a group of neighbors in Buena Vista. The group does not want to be incorporated and, because they are outside the city limits, did not get to

vote on the Watsonville ballot measure last year.

"(The measure) is going to change the whole character of our community," said Karin Kerber-Smith. "We understand the need for housing, (but) we think there are other alternatives than going out into these rural areas."

She wants more "in-fill," meaning putting new development within the city limits.

In addition to a changed landscape, Kerber-Smith cites degradation to watersheds and overuse of water supplies as reasons to oppose the city's expansion.

She and neighbors plan to retain legal counsel to fight against LAFCO's approval, a decision most think is two years away.

But city officials plan to address concerns like Kerber-Smith's in advance of LAFCO's decision. And they're confident they'll find solutions and maintain broad support from the community.

"(Critics) can hold out and hope this (expansion) doesn't happen, or they can help us along the way and be constructive, and make sure their needs are addressed," said Assistant City Manager Tavantzis.

Contact Kurtis Alexander at kalexander@santa-cruz.com.