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Growth choices

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could change

General Plan

Move may force overhaul of already overdue plan

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The ramifications of changes to Watsonville's growth plan that were adopted by city planners earlier this month will be the focus of tonight's Planning Commission meeting.

Heading the list of issues will be how to resolve the potential loss of critically-needed new housing and the possibility that a revision of the entire draft of *Watsonville 2005*, the city's already long-overdue General Plan, will be required.

The extent of how the changes will open the city to possible lawsuits will also be discussed.

On Oct. 6, the commission adopted a growth scenario that differed from a half-dozen options that had been the focus of months of review and discussion. In adopting the new alternative, the commission changed an "urban limit line" that bordered the plan's "sphere of influence."

The sphere of influence includes

those areas outside the current city limits that are targeted for annexation and development to provide jobs and housing.

Among those areas are a parcel west of Lee Road coveted by a San Francisco developer for a mixed-use project of recreation and affordable and market-rate housing; an area south of Corralitos Creek where 250 homes could be built; the Buena Vista area, where 500 homes could go; the Manabe-Bergstrom property on the west side, where industrial or commercial development could create 1,750 jobs; and the Resetar property, at Highway 1 and Riverside Drive, where another 1,250 jobs could be generated.

The Franich property along East Lake Avenue is also included in the approved alternative.

According to city planners, the changes provide the city greater flexibility in future development in dealing with politics, public opinion and actual development.

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But a consequence of the proposed changes in the plan is the loss of between 650 and 950 new housing units. The reduction in potential housing will reduce the number of people the city will be able to accommodate.

Planning Director, Maureen Owens, in a report she will deliver to the commission tonight, said, "This reduction has the effect of altering a primary premise of the Plan."

"A reduction of the growth potential would have potential socio-economic effects due to the fact that it will be more difficult (if not impossible) to meet many of the housing objectives of the General Plan."

Among the city's most pressing objective that would be impeded would be to alleviate the city's overcrowding by building new housing Watsonville residents can afford.

In addition, *Watsonville 2005* was written based on a potential growth rate of 1.8 percent. The reduction in new housing would mean that 1,800 to 2,700 fewer people could be provided for, and would require that the draft General Plan be rewritten to reflect the new anticipated growth rate of 1.4 percent.

The plan's adopted Housing Element would also have to be revised and resubmitted to the state for certification.

The new growth scenario's sphere of influence includes the Lee Road that had not been previously included and was not extensively addressed by the General Plan's companion environmental impact report.

The city attorney's office has concluded that, should the city be sued over development, the current EIR may or may not be adequate to cover the city's action.

Owens said the city has two options as this point: to prepare a Supplemental EIR on the Lee Road development right now, or to consider the parcel in a specific plan, including annexation, development and environmental impact.

If the city opts to reject the new alternative's reduction in future residential land and inclusion in the sphere of influence of the Lee Road area, no additional environmental review would be required.

Should the city adopt the proposed sphere of influence changes, Owens predicted it would be another year before the city had a General Plan in place.

Because the city has been making progress on the draft General Plan, Owens said pressure from the state to adopt a plan had been kept at bay. But she added that she didn't know what the state's response would be "If we start all over."

The Planning Commission meeting will be held tonight at 7:30 in City Council Chambers, 250 Main St.