

City considering tax to buy greenbelt property

By KAREN CLARK

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Council members will meet with a pollster this month to discuss ways to gauge public support for a multimillion-dollar parcel tax to fund such city priorities as buying more greenbelt land.

"The question is what two-thirds of the voters ... are likely to support," said City Manager Dick Wilson at Tuesday's meeting of the council's Budget Committee.

The central issue will be whether there is enough interest among residents in buying and maintaining the 246-acre Bombay property to tax themselves over the next several years.

But council members also are considering going for even more from voters.

Among the projects that pollsters may discuss with potential voters in the next few months are:

- Repair and renovation of historic City Hall and its grounds.
- Renovation of the Pogonip Clubhouse.
- Purchase of the old depot site on Washington Street, which could be used in part for soccer and ball fields.
- Creating a trust fund to pay for more affordable housing.

Councilman Scott Kennedy suggested that the parcel-tax increase to help buy and maintain the Bombay property should be placed on

the June ballot. Any remaining projects would be covered by a second parcel-tax measure on the November ballot.

Kennedy said the split might be necessary if Bombay property owners don't agree to keeping a purchase option open through November. Negotiations are under way between the property owner and a council task force to extend that purchase option, which currently ends in September.

As a fall-back measure, the council already has thrown its support behind a 25-unit development project on a portion of the Bombay parcel.

In exchange for allowing that development plan to go into the plan-

ning pipeline, the council negotiated a deal where some 90 percent of the Bombay property would be handed over to a land trust, never to be developed.

But some community members lambasted the council for "caving in" to the property owner by being willing to consider even the 25-unit development. They asked for more time to find the money to buy the entire piece of property outright.

Council members said city coffers may provide a portion of the funding, but private foundations and voters likely would have to make up the bulk of the purchase price, which could be more than \$3 million.

Mayor Cynthia Mathews, a member of the Budget Committee, said she believed Kennedy's proposal to split the parcel-tax increase request onto two separate ballots might backfire.

Voters, she said, might not approve a second tax increase coming just five months after the greenbelt request on the June ballot.

Councilman Mike Rotkin, the third member of the committee, also pointed out that including a variety of projects on the parcel-tax increase request could bring out a more diverse group of potential supporters.

The three agreed that a final recommendation to the council should await review of polling data. The committee will meet with a pollster to go over potential questions later this month, but a specific date has not been set.