

able housing corp., and Virginia Brown, far right, a housing group.

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# Planning for growth

## 'More guesswork than science' is involved

By CHELA ZABIN  
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville needs to plan for growth, but that may involve more guesswork than science.

The City Council and community members wrestled with growth problems last night in a meeting on the city's General Plan, which serves as a long-term guide for growth in the city.

They must try to figure out how many people will come here over the next 20 years, what kind of housing and other services they will need, and how to protect agricultural lands, neighborhoods and environmentally sensitive areas at the same time.

Nancy Alexander, a consultant for the city, detailed several population projections through 2005 for Watsonville and its "sphere of influence" — the area just outside the city limits designated for urban development that could be annexed to the city.

She mapped out how many new acres the city would need to acquire to provide enough housing,

parks and industrial/commercial development for all those new people.

Between 1980 and 1990 the city's population grew by 2.8 percent a year. Even assuming a slower growth rate over the next couple of decades, say 1.8 percent, the number of new acres needed is staggering — somewhere between 902 and 1,876, depending on the density of the new housing.

Figuring out what the growth rate will be is not easy. Members of the City Council and the public made cases for both higher and lower rates, taking into account historic growth, the larger number of young (under 17) and older (over 64) people in the area and the ethnic makeup of the city.

Determining how many acres would be needed for housing also depends on a number of factors — not all land can or will be developed to the density allowed. A city policy requiring building to a maximum density — a suggestion made by Alexander last night — as well as the housing market could affect those numbers. How

much park space is required will also depend, in part, on the population — a younger population would require more parks than an older one.

But even by the most conservative growth estimates, the city may need to acquire more acres than are available. Councilwoman Betty Murphy pointed out that the land in the sphere of influence is not large and is mostly developed.

Because of the county's slow-growth policy, annexing more unincorporated land may not be politically feasible.

Growth can't continue forever, either, Mayor Todd McFarren said.

"There is a certain holding capacity in the Pajaro Valley," he said. "We need to come to grips with what that holding capacity is."

There also appears to be inherent conflicts between the goals of providing housing and jobs for the city's future residents and protecting agriculture, a neighborhood atmosphere and natural resources.

Making sure agriculture remains viable means more than not building on fields, Alexander said. It includes land for support industries, such as cold storage and packing, housing for farm workers and others in the agricultural industry, and insuring a plentiful supply of water.

While many tout higher densities and building taller buildings as a way to use the land most efficiently and prevent urban sprawl, others worry about the effect that denser housing would have on Watsonville's neighborhoods, traffic and parks.

And while it may be ideal to build as much as possible on land within the city, or just outside it, protection of wetlands and other environmentally significant areas must be factored in. Local environmentalists are calling for even more protection, including larger "buffer zones" around sensitive areas, than is currently provided in the General Plan.

Another meeting on the plan is scheduled for Oct. 24 at 7:30 p.m. at City Hall.