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Airport to lose manager

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After the first of the year, Watsonville will no longer have an airport manager.

The City Council, acting on a recommendation by City Manager Steve Salomon, voted unanimously last night to trim the position from the city staff.

Salomon made the recommendation as a cost-saving measure for the city, which is in a tight financial position because of budget problems at the state level and the recession in general. He said airport manager Kim Wirht, who was not at last night's meeting, has been aware for about a month that such a recommendation was going to be considered.

More specifically, the cut was made as a way to keep the airport's budget balanced. The airport is supposed to operate as a self-supporting entity within the city, covering all its expenses with revenue it raises. Because of its tight fiscal status, the city has recently taken a look at such operations — known as enterprise funds — and directed staff to make sure they are paying their fair portion of costs shared by all of the city departments. Those costs include insurance, data processing and the services of the personnel and finance department. Those services

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had previously been provided free to the enterprise funds.

The airport began paying for those things this fiscal year but, according to city finance director Eric Frost, who spent some time looking at the airport's finances over the last eight years, it can't cover the costs. Frost figured that if the airport had been required to pay the other city departments what it owed during that eight-year period, it would have ended up with an annual loss of \$73,000.

The cutting of Wirht's position is only one of the steps the city intends to take to keep the airport operation in the black. Also planned is the construction of a self-fueling island, designed to generate more revenue for the airport by increasing the hours pilots can fuel up, and reduce costs by eliminating employees needed to pump the fuel. Those two changes should make a difference of \$100,000 a year, enough to cover the shortfall and to put aside some money for depreciation, it was estimated.

Wirht's duties will be divided up among different city departments, with Assistant Fire Chief Don French, who is a pilot, taking over a good deal of responsibility for airport operations. An advisory committee will be set up to help guide the city in running the airport.

Salomon said this is just one of several positions the city has eliminated in its attempts to fend off a budget deficit. He figured Watsonville has saved nearly \$500,000 by not filling positions vacated when workers leave. In the case of the airport, however, he said, "We can't wait for attrition, we can't wait for someone to retire."

Salomon told the council he believed cutting the manager position was the only way to make sure the airport enterprise would be able to meet its financial obligations.

Stan Corder, president of the Watsonville Pilots Association, told the council his group "will give you as much help as we can" in running the airport.

Eugene Emerson, who lives near the airport, suggested that Wirht was being removed because she had run afoul of pilots by enforcing noise and safety regulations too enthusiastically.

"I'm not here to make Ms. Wirht a martyr," he said, "(but) she was responsive to the general public in that regard."

But Salomon emphasized that Wirht's removal was made purely on financial grounds.

"I can tell you I have not had a single conversation with the pilots' association about this recommendation," he said. "There is no particular ax to grind here in any way. It's a financial decision."

Salomon said he lives near the airport, too, and assured Emerson that the city staff is very aware of the noise and safety issues.