

Planning  
1976-1985

# City running out of room

By STEVE STROTH  
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville is quickly running out of room to house its residents, and city officials see no immediate way to solve the problem.

In just 10 years, land available for new housing will have disappeared, according to a study recently released by the city.

Also, the city is prevented by current county restrictions from annexing nearby land to provide more housing property, planners say.

"There is virtually no housing available in Watsonville right now," city Planning Director Bud Carney said this morning. "The vacancy factor is less than 1 percent. In fact, it's .2 percent. That's something we're very concerned about," he said.

Compounding the problem is the city's inability to do anything about its evaporating housing land, Carney said.

"We have less than a 10-year supply of projected housing (property) — about 235 acres," he said. After that is used, there's no place to grow, Carney said.

"We're locked in. We're surrounded on three sides by (Santa Cruz) County and by Monterey County on the other side," he said.

"We're going to reach a point where we'll cap out, and that'll be it," City Manager John Radin said. "People will have to go somewhere else. There just won't be any more room."

The bitter reality of Watsonville's housing woes is outlined in a Planning Department study which profiles the city's housing, employment and population trends.

The study, which is currently in draft form and will be completed later this month, will be used to update the city's General Plan. The General Plan is a land-use guideline for all city development.

City planners will hold a public hearing on the study, which they call the General Plan Housing Element, at 7:30 p.m. July 24 in the City Council chambers.

In the study, city planners recognize that the city's rapid population growth in recent years has made housing availability a "critical" issue for the future.

"We've approved new housing units (nearly 700) that will help out, but the growth rate is such that the housing problem ... will be quite severe in the future," Carney said.

The 235 acres of available housing land could produce

2,128 new housing units, plus another 500 units if zoning densities are increased, Carney said.

As of last year, the city had 9,183 units. But the city won't have enough housing even with the potential 23 percent increase the new units could provide.

A 61 percent increase in the city's population between 1970 and 1980 forced rapid growth and new housing starts, according to the study. But buildable land has become scarce as the population has continued to grow.

By 1990, the city's current population of more than 26,000 will teeter around the 30,000 mark, planners estimate.

"The total population projected for the urbanized Watsonville area is 45,000 by the year 1990," the report states.

Dealing with the housing shortage has sent city officials clamoring for answers.

Carney said city officials will begin review of the General Plan later this year to better outline how to deal with

the problem.

The current General Plan does not include the type of long-range planning that answers the city's current housing crunch, he said.

Meanwhile, the city will do the best it can with the land available, he added.

The city will examine construction projects which could replace currently dilapidated, unsafe housing. Although just 1 percent of the city's housing falls under that category, the land those units rest on could be used for higher-density housing.

"Our current zoning on many of those properties is 20 units an acre," Carney said. Many of the nearly 100 dilapidated buildings targeted for replacement are in densities of six units an acre, he said.

The city will also encourage developers to take advantage of federal and state housing programs that supply low-interest loans or bonds in exchange for guarantees of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families.

Affordability is nearly as critical as availability.

"Most people can't afford to buy new homes," Radin said. "When you have high demand, that keeps the price up and low-income (families) get pushed out."

The city will encourage affordable housing with each project, but single-family homes won't solve the problem, Radin said.

"I think you'll see more apartment housing because it's the only thing people can afford," he said.

Rental units account for 39 percent of all housing in the city today, according to the study. In 1970, only 19 percent of the housing units were rentals.

In addition to using what land is still available to them, city officials hope current county restrictions on growth will change.

"Sooner or later the county is going to have to relax their no-growth attitude," Radin said, adding that the housing shortage is only compounded by the policy.

"Those are political decisions, and the political scenario could change after the next election," Carney said.

Meanwhile, the city must cope with its current housing shortage.

"At this point, I don't have any specific answers as to how these issues can be addressed," Carney said.

## REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE  
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN  
July 15, 1985