

Watsonville - Growth

# Changing Times in the Little Apple

***Watsonville city leaders are feeling the strain of their town's transformation from a farming community to a growing urban center***

By Bob Johnson

**H**ometown Watsonville developers Tony Campos, Zane Ota and Andrew Moore had no inkling that they would ignite a major public controversy when they asked late last year for permission to build a modest 27-unit townhouse complex in the Crestview Drive neighborhood on the east side of town. The seemingly innocent project galvanized Watsonville area farmers to demand protection from their local government. The controversy provided Betty Murphy with her most important issue in her overwhelming election as Watsonville mayor last May. And the issue still lives as the most significant land use question at Watsonville City Hall.

The 27 townhouses in question will be built just 50 feet from an apple orchard farmed by John Lukrich, who has grown apples around Watsonville for more than three decades. And there will be a little traffic in that 50 feet because the developers plan to use it for the new access road to their project. "There's a certain amount of dust, noise and spray involved in farming," said Lukrich of his prospective neighbors. "I don't want to have to be responsible if it bothers people."

As the new neighbors get ready to mosey down the road by the orchard to their townhouse parking lot, Watsonville struggles with an identity problem. City leaders hold fond attachments to the small, neighborly town that most of them grew up in. And no one doubts that the backbone of the economy is the eight area frozen food plants and the surrounding flower nurseries, apple orchards, and strawberry and lettuce fields. But the lure of cash, and the inability of the coastal yuppie belt to house its servants, have created strong pressures to develop. It took more than a century for the town to reach the 14,000 population mark in 1970 but the second 14,000 has arrived in less than two decades. Watsonville is running out of room, and future development will have to take the long march through the orchards and fields of the Pajaro Valley.

The specter of suburbanites cruising home a few feet from Lukrich's apple trees convinced the farmers to fight for protection. "If the city is serious about preserving agriculture in the Pajaro Valley," Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau President Tom AmRhein wrote the city council in January, "you must take aggressive

measures now to insure our industry's future. One step that can be taken to minimize potential conflicts between new development and production agriculture is to plan new growth in areas that are away from prime agriculture land." If townhouses and orchards must be neighbors the farmers asked, at the least, for a 50-foot to 200-foot buffer, fortified by a brick wall and heavy plantings, and off-limits for all roads, parking lots and cars.

Murphy took up the farmers' call for a stronger buffer as a member of the city council in February and, after Mayor Ann Soldo's surprise retirement made Murphy a candidate for mayor, the issue became a key in her surprisingly easy win over four-term councilmember Rex Clark. (The May 5 election also saw the voters choose Campos, one of the Crestview developers, as the first Hispanic ever to serve on the Watsonville City Council.) Despite the persistence of Murphy and the farmers, the buffer issue has moved slowly and the council will hold its first public hearing on the proposal on September 22.

**"Without using the words 'let's make a deal'..."**

Watsonville City Manager John Radin innocently suggested during a study session on the buffer this summer that the farmers may ultimately find their buffer in Salsipuedes and Corralitos Creeks, which are both a few miles east of the current city limits. Development to the creeks would greatly profit the legal profession, as suburban environmentalists throughout Santa Cruz County would doubtless fight in court to preserve every inch of farmland. But Radin's candid remark points toward a blunt reality: Watsonville is running out of room.

There are only 175 acres of vacant land zoned for housing left in the city of Watsonville. Under present zoning that land will hold fewer than 1,900 units of housing, according to the city planning department, and by 1991 development will have exhausted all available housing land within the city limits. Attempts to expand those city limits have repeatedly, and generally successfully, been opposed by the countywide environmentalist majority.

The proposal to build the massive Landmark industrial park at the entrance to Watsonville from Santa Cruz led the City of Watsonville and the County of Santa Cruz into a legal battle that ended only with an agreement to phase in the project, which



Joe Gerber and the gang at Murphy's Crossing

could eventually employ 5,000 people and will be the largest industrial development in the history of Santa Cruz County.

North County environmentalists have also, so far, thwarted Tony Franch's efforts to turn his apple orchard east of town into the site for a housing project. And the attempt to bring a badly needed sewer line to the county fairgrounds has also been stalled by environmentalists concerned it would encourage a crop of condos on the adjacent farmlands.

The growth-conscious suspicion of Watsonville that prevails at the county government center has even added a bizarre pause before the happy last chapter to the most tragic housing story in local memory can be written.

Building number five of the farm

labor housing camp on Joe Gerber's vegetable ranch east of Watsonville was engulfed in flames during the early morning hours of July 18, 1982. A few days before the fire, the Ortega family in apartment 502 thought they smelled a leak from their butane kitchen stove. An explosion of the gas from the stove began the fire that razed three apartments at Murphy's Crossing Camp building number five, including the Ortega home, and killed Olivia Ortega, the nine-month-old unborn child Olivia was carrying and eight-month-old Alonso Ortega.

Joe Gerber had not paid much attention to the housing camp next door to his home—he leased the housing complex to Watsonville realtor Jimmie Hicks—and would not pay much attention to it until Hicks bailed out a year ago because a Santa

Cruz County Superior Court judge ordered completion of a long list of repairs at the camp.

"I had to take an interest in it," Gerber said after Hicks ended his lease. "Those people wouldn't have had any place to live." Nearly every morning for three months Gerber, then 73 years old, walked from his home to work on the repairs at the camp next door. Truckloads of debris were hauled from the premises; 150 tons of base rock were hauled in to improve the drainage; doors, windows and fire sprinklers were installed; and Murphy's Crossing was given a long overdue paint job.

By the time of last year's Christmas party at the camp—with Gerber supplying two pigs he shot outside Hollister for dinner—he was ready to sell the camp to the county housing





Mayor Betty Murphy

authority, which has plans to phase in new apartments on the property. The sale cannot go through, however, until the county approves a lot split that would separate the housing camp from Gerber's home and 30-acre farm property. The camp has occupied the land to be sold for more than three decades. Its return

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to farming would require razing the camp, bulldozing out the packed-in dirt, and hauling in new topsoil. But Gerber has spent the year managing a housing complex—and wondering when he gets to retire and return to hunting and fishing—because the county is reluctant to allow a split of land zoned commercial-agricultural.

But a softening of the county's resistance toward development around Watsonville could be in the offing, as the most dramatic change in land use policies since growth control was adopted a decade ago has been quietly developing behind the scenes.

The Pajaro Valley Chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) has asked both the City of Watsonville and the County of Santa Cruz to move dramatically from their old ways in order to respond to the housing crisis that is devastating area field and food-processing workers. The Pajaro Valley—home to more than 90,000 people from Eureka Canyon Road north of Watsonville to the Castroville-Prunedale area of Monterey County—has quietly become one of the fastest-growing areas of the entire California Central Coast. There is already a shortage of at least 2,000 housing units on each side of the Pajaro River, the shortage is growing worse,

and Hispanic workers are bearing the brunt of the crisis.

LULAC has called on Watsonville to require that 25 percent of all new housing development be affordable by people with average incomes for the Pajaro Valley and also to require that new industry coming to the area also contribute to the affordable housing stock. The county, in turn, has been asked to forgo its resistance to annexation of marginal farmlands to the west of Watsonville.

"What we're asking for is some give-and-take between the city and the county," said Celia Organista, who is president of the Pajaro Valley chapter of LULAC and who was named early this summer as the national organization's woman of the year. The Watsonville City Council asked for more time to look at the sweeping proposal, while agreeing to search immediately for publicly owned land that would be suitable for affordable housing. The county supervisors went on record last month as willing to seriously consider annexations if Watsonville launches a housing campaign.

"I was involved in the housing task force that LULAC put together and I was dubious at first," said Supervisor Gary Patton, the county's strongest

growth-control advocate, of a committee of public and private representatives from Watsonville, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. "I assumed that everybody would just jump on the county and they did. But after a while it became clear that Watsonville is concerned about a shortage of land while the county is concerned about a shortage of housing. Without using the words 'let's make a deal,' we started thinking in terms of the city and county considering a package of options neither would accept alone." The city and county are expected to meet this month and, when asked how far he would give in on annexations to promote housing, Patton said, "If we were able to work together I would be willing to consider a lot of things."

***"It gives me a sense of satisfaction to see beautiful things growing."***

This spring Watsonville held its second town meeting—the first came in response to the bitter frozen food strike—to discuss the future of the city. Watsonville has many of the pieces needed for a small-time boom. The huge industrial park has finally made a modest beginning; this park is next to the new shopping center at Green Valley Road and Main Street;

this shopping center is across Main from the still-under-construction Watsonville Square shopping center; and the city needs more land to satisfy the needs of housing developers.

But many locals are growing anxious that the town of their childhood memories could be destroyed by success. "I'd hate for our grandchildren to look at those east hills and see them all terraced because all the good land was paved over," one longtime Watsonville resident said during the town meeting this spring. "Our land has been God-blessed—there is a place to build and a place to grow."

Many Watsonville residents like to feel that their town is still small enough, and stable enough, to cultivate a neighborly cooperative attitude.

After Betty Murphy's election as mayor in May, one of her first, and most satisfying, moves was to bring out of retirement an 81-year-old woman who specializes in organizing volunteer community efforts to beautify public places. Reviving the Beautification Committee was a very Betty Murphy kind of thing to do and the people of this town just chose Murphy as their mayor by a 2-1 margin over a four-term councilmember



Beautification expert Dorothy Mossbarger

whose parents grew up in Watsonville.

Watsonville won first place for cities with fewer than 25,000 people in the 1967 National Cleanup contest sponsored by First Lady Lady Bird Johnson. The secret weapon in Watsonville's relentless struggle against tawdry appearances was Dorothy Mossbarger, who moved to Watsonville with her family in 1920 and has devoted much of her adult life to public beauty. "My life has mostly been beautification projects," Mossbarger said. "It gives me a sense of satisfaction to see beautiful things growing."

In the 1960s Mossbarger led the Beautification Committee, which organized volunteer community efforts to improve Watsonville's appearance. The mosaic tile on the Union Street side of the public library was pieced together by the committee with help from Watsonville High School students. The top on the bandstand in the center of the Main Street Plaza was bought with funds raised by the committee. The committee also landscaped with donated plants around a donated fountain the small neighborhood park on Freedom Boulevard out toward Green Valley. "They keep it up very well," Mossbarger said of city parks' care of that Freedom Boulevard park. "I'm pleased."

Mossbarger accepted when Murphy asked her to revive the Beautification Committee, which had disappeared in the 1970s. It is too early to tell where beauty will break out next in Watsonville—the committee is still getting organized—but the veteran chairwoman hopes to put together one major project each year.

One tradition that definitely will be revived is the sign that moves from home to home throughout Watsonville to announce the winner of the monthly home and garden improvement award (front yards only need apply).

"I really should stop doing these things," said Mossbarger, who celebrated her 81st birthday in May. "I'd like to teach somebody a little younger so these things can keep going on." But until someone younger does come along, Mossbarger will lead Watsonville's revived forces for beauty.



Main Street, Watsonville