

Hospital gets by another hurdle; appeal rejected

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Construction of the new Watsonville Community Hospital cleared another hurdle last night when the City Council rejected an appeal filed by a local developer who said the new hospital would interfere with his ability to build on his property that is adjacent to the new site.

By a 6-1 vote, the council rejected the appeal filed by William A. Burgstrom. Councilman Lowell Hurst voted to accept the appeal.

On Jan. 17, the city's Planning Commission approved a special use permit for the hospital, allowing construction to commence. The new building will be on the 27-acre Seagate Technology property at Airport Boulevard and Nielsen Street. Seagate shut down operations in Watsonville about two years ago. Hospital officials said construction is scheduled to start in April or May.

When Burgstrom appealed the Planning Commission decision, the matter automatically went before the council. The appeal was the latest roadblock the hospital has run into since it decided to move from its present local at Green Valley and Holohan Roads. Construction plans have already met most safety and environmental requirements, and the hospital has received approval from the Federal Aviation Administration to build a helicopter pad on the new site. The hospital has a heliport at its current site.

Burgstrom said the heliport would interfere with development plans on his property because it places limits on building heights. City planning department staff disagree. A consultant provided the city with a detailed study of helicopter flight patterns and made sure the heliport met all federal safety requirements.

Councilman Hurst said noise from the helicopters would also create a problem, particularly for the Monterey Vista Mobile Home Park next to the hospital site. Hurst said the noise from aircraft would be a "rude awakening" to

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the residents of the mobile home park, which is made up mostly of senior citizens. City officials estimate that the heliport would be used on an average of twice a week.

Councilman Al Alcalá said the city can't appease everybody.

"So what if someone's sleep is disturbed," Alcalá said. "Someone is always going to complain." Helicopters, he said, "save lives."

The new \$67 million hospital will have 98 beds, with plans to expand to 128 beds. The old hospital was severely damaged in the 1989 earthquake. The decision to move came when repair cost estimates reached about half what it would cost to build a new facility.

In other City Council action:

- A letter voicing concern about changes in the data-gathering procedures to be used in the census in 2000 will be sent to Congressional representatives from California and the Census Bureau.

The proposed changes could decrease the accuracy of census information gathered in towns similar in demographics to Watsonville.

For example, the Census Bureau wants to move the date of the census to March, a time when a large number of agricultural workers have not yet arrived in the Pajaro Valley. The Census Bureau also wants to use data from a "sample survey" instead of data from the Census long form. This could result in incomplete and inaccurate information about residents' education, income, employment and housing, the council said.

The Census Bureau plans to use a smaller sample to check for ac-

curacy. This could severely distort data from cities with populations under 250,000. It also plans to decrease non-response follow ups from 100 percent to 30 percent.

City officials have complained before about the Census Bureau's shortcomings in gathering data. Local studies show that the 1990 census severely undercounted in Watsonville. Statewide, undercounting that year, particularly of Latinos in larger cities in the south and north, was estimated in the millions, according to some studies.

Complaints have fallen of deaf ears, Councilman Hurst said.

"Our letters (to the Census Bureau) were brushed aside, our concerns trivialized," Hurst said. "The census is not working well for us."

- The sale of Sonic Cable to TCI Cable was postponed for at least 30 days.

A letter received by the city yesterday afternoon from Sonic requested the delay. City officials are hoping the delay will allow time to work out a more detailed plan, which could include improvements to the present cable system.

But the city is not too optimistic that the sale will bring any radical changes to cable service in Watsonville. Essentially, customers will get the same system, including the same amount of channels. But TCI has said it could install a fiber-optics system that could improve picture quality within a year.

The city is hoping the sale will provide some leverage in negotiations with TCI. Customer complaints about Sonic have been loud and frequent. The city's contract with Sonic runs until 2003.