

Housing advocates unveil airport plan

By DENISE FRANKLIN
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WATSONVILLE — A plan for 1,870 affordable homes, three schools and a park to replace the Watsonville Municipal Airport was unveiled Friday by low-income housing advocates.

The proposal has no official backing, according to Mayor Todd McFarren.

But the Watsonville Housing Action Committee, a loose-knit group of 200 citizens, doesn't want to wait for the City Council to come up with a solution for the housing crisis, said committee member Frank Bardacke.

Bardacke said the committee wants to get away from a "top-down notion of planning" and let the community decide.

"It is a very democratic activity. We don't know if the community supports this, but we will offer them a choice," he said.

The city has estimated that there is a need for 2,000 affordable housing units. The development, called Watsonville Airport Gardens, would serve existing residents who would be given first priority for housing, said Bardacke.

The plans for the 330 acres between Airport Boulevard and Buena Vista Road were described by architect Sigrid Miller Pollin during a press conference in front of City Hall. Councilman Johnny Kacsmaryk was the only city official in attendance.

A tree-line boulevard would be located in the same spot as the existing main runway, said Pollin, associate professor of architecture at California Polytechnic University, Pomona.

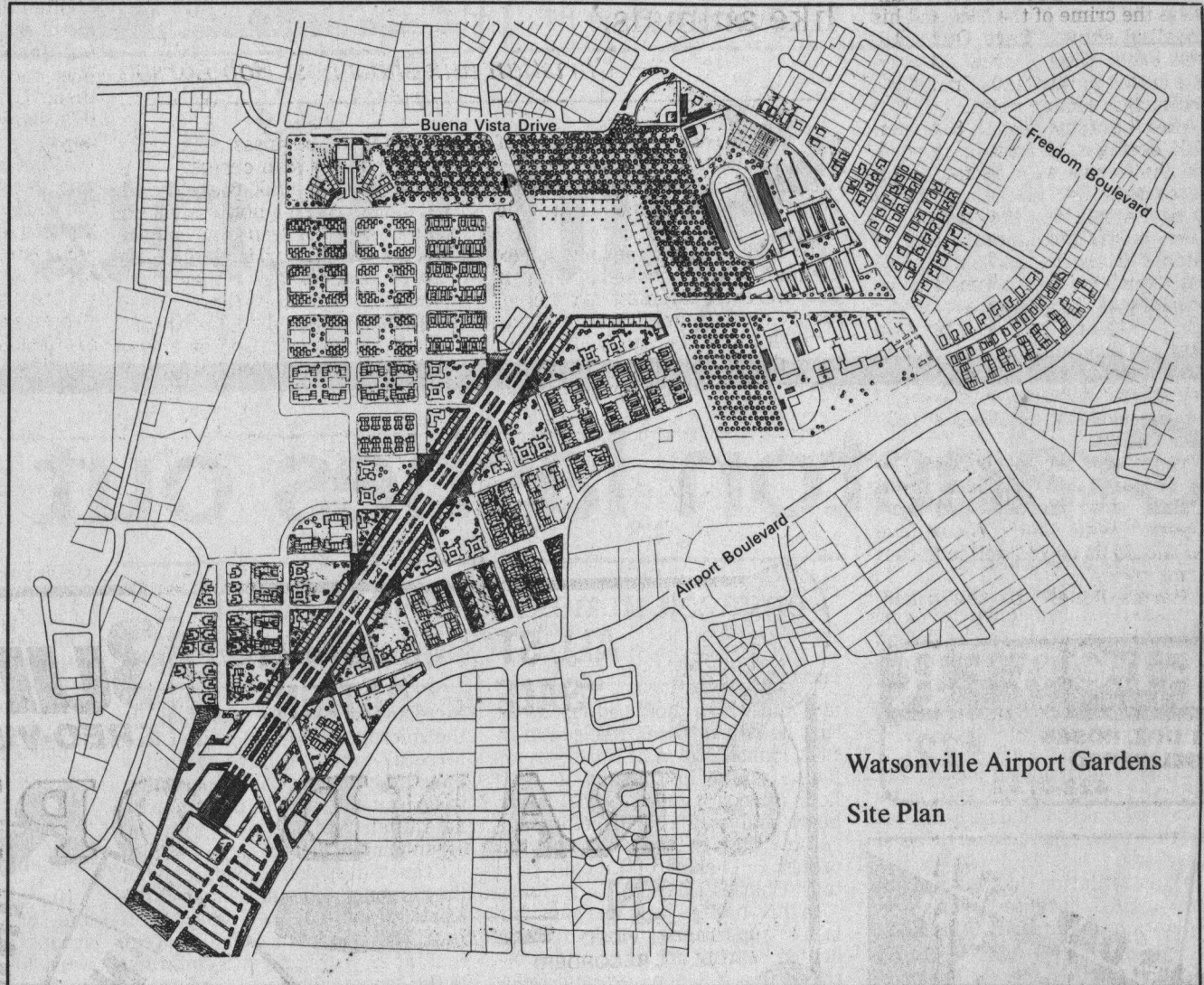
"What we are showing is a memory of the airstrip," she stated.

Pollin proposed commercial development on land nearest Highway 1. It could include a movie theater complex, supermarket and small, convenience stores.

Neighborhoods would mostly be located on either side of the boulevard. Residents could walk through neighborhoods to the boulevard, where they could pick up public transportation, Pollin continued.

The boulevard would culminate at a diamond-shaped plaza that could be used for community gatherings and open-air markets.

A large park would be located at the northeast end of the property, between the plaza and the new high school and junior high school. A new



The housing plan envisions turning the runway into a tree-lined boulevard ending in a plaza.

elementary school would be built at the other end of the park.

The Pajaro Unified School District has identified a future need for an additional elementary school, middle school and high school, according to school district business manager Bob Peterson.

More than 75 acres of parkland would be included.

One of the main drawbacks to building affordable housing is the cost of land, Bardacke noted. In the case of the airport, the land is owned by the city.

Proponents suggest the city provide the land on a long-term lease basis or as a land trust to non-profit housing

corporations, which would build the homes.

The homes, both rented and owned, would be a mix of multiple-family dwellings, duplexes and single family homes.

Proponents suggest the city sell existing commercial land for the new commercial uses. Land for schools could be bought with state funds from the city.

Mayor McFarren said he doesn't believe the council will back replacement of the airport with affordable housing. However, an upcoming city study of the airport's contribution to the economy and its potential will in-

clude a look at alternative uses of the property, McFarren said.

Councilman Kacsmaryk noted at the press conference that the airport provides 100 jobs and is self-supporting. The housing advocates should look instead at 64 acres of undeveloped land available in the city, he said.

It was noted at a recent City Council meeting that the Federal Aviation Administration could prevent the closure of the airport unless it could be shown it would benefit civil aviation.

The FAA also has given the city \$4 million to \$5 million for airport development which it could require be paid back. Bardacke said the FAA could forgive these loans.