

Planners look at housing problems of farm workers

By BOB SMITH
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A comprehensive study of Santa Cruz County's farm-housing needs could be under way by next spring.

In the meantime, county planning commissioners are recommending that farm-worker housing rules be tightened to prevent potential abuses.

It will ultimately be up to county supervisors to decide if the rules allowing farm-worker housing on the Pajaro Valley's farms and ranches will be altered.

But the changes recommended by the commission yesterday on a 3-1 vote would give the county's Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee and the county Planning Department the power to stop abuses such as a 1,500-square-foot home recently completed on Mount Madonna Road. The house was built as farm-worker housing, but Farm Bureau leaders and others believe it is really intended as a second family home.

Dale Skillicorn, who represents the Pajaro Valley on the Planning Commission, cast the single vote against the proposed ordinance, saying a study should be completed before the ordinance is changed.

Planning Commission Chairman Ted Durkee, of Aptos, said he probably would have voted against the changes as well, had he voted. Durkee disqualified himself from the vote because he had been hospitalized in September when the issue was first discussed by the commission.

The county had already planned a cursory study of the problem next spring as part of its General Plan updates.

"I think we have to recognize that farming has changed," Skillicorn told the commission. "Very few of the farm laborers live on-site anymore. You have a labor force that moves from field to field, owner to owner so that on-site housing is much less important than it was before."

Durkee said it was "putting the cart before the horse for the commission to adopt anything right now. It is not just a case of the farm workers, but it is a case of what do we do about affordable housing for all people." Durkee spoke from the audience.

"We don't believe," said Legal Aid Society attorney Gary McNeil, "that the present ordinance does anything to produce more farm-worker housing. There has been no clear policy for more than 10 years to affordable housing in Santa Cruz County. We are forcing people more into urban, overcrowded conditions."

McNeil praised the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau for its efforts in developing some farm-worker housing in Watsonville, but, he said, "it is just the tip of the iceberg."

Community Action Board executive director Christine Johnson-Lyons told the commission that there were nearly 5,000 farm workers in Santa Cruz County in September while, at the same time, the county reported that there were 880 privately and publicly owned housing units available to them.

Johnson-Lyons told the commission that the Environmental Health Services agency, which inspects them, says there are now 25 privately operated farm-worker camps in Santa Cruz County, housing 540 employees.

Assistant Planning Director Jeff Loux told the commission yesterday morning that the county will also apply for a \$30,000 state Community Development Block Grant to take an in-depth look at the farm workers' plight.

The county may not get the state money, but the move is the first official acknowledgement at the county level that there may be a housing crisis for farm workers in Santa Cruz County.

Members of an ad hoc coalition, representing the Community Action Board, the Legal Aid Society, and the California Rural Legal Assistance, told planning commissioners yesterday that there may be hundreds, if not thousands, of farm workers in Santa Cruz County living in shacks, in cars, under bridges or in overcrowded, substandard homes.

The ad hoc group proposes major changes in the county philosophy toward farm-labor housing.

The present policy, endorsed again yesterday, says the county's prime agricultural land should be held solely for crops and grazing.

The committee is suggesting that "farm worker housing centers" — groups of between 50 and 100 units — be built in the midst of the farms. County planners say those developments should be in urban areas — Freedom and Watsonville.

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau board member Bruce Dau said his group believes "housing should be created inside the urban areas to minimize conflicts with agricultural uses."

The ad hoc proposal should be looked at in the General Plan revisions and the farm-worker housing study, Dau said.

California Rural Legal Assistance attorney Darryel B. Nacua said the group decided to get involved now in what was otherwise a somewhat technical change in the county's rules.

"We thought the process was being done backwards because the (county) housing element needed to be updated first," Nacua told the commission.

Commissioner Skillicorn agreed with that position, telling commissioners early in the hearing that the nature of farming has changed and that the old rules — basically binding a farm laborer to one farmer's employment and housing — no longer fit the situation.

The county Housing Authority operates the Buena Vista migrant labor camp, with space for 100 families, and the adjacent Tierra Alta farm-labor complex, which houses 70 families. Figuring two workers per household in the public housing projects, that's a total of 880 workers, Johnson-Lyons said.

The state Employment Development Department reported 5,720 employed in agriculture in September — not a big change from the 4,550 in 1986.

But the demographics have changed.

In 1986, the state survey found that 2,080 were classified as "regular" employees (employed for five months or longer). Seasonal or migrant workers accounted for 2,470.

Today, however, the number of regular employees has risen to 4,850 and the seasonal labor force has dropped to 870.

(These numbers are different from the total number of jobs in agriculture. The number of jobs increases every time a worker changes employers, thus one laborer might work for two or three different farmers in the reporting period and inflate the number of jobs in the agricultural sector.)

The CAB executive director couples that trend with figures from the city of Watsonville. The 1987 city General Plan housing element said that 43 percent of all Hispanic households lived in overcrowded conditions.

In April, the Watsonville housing task force estimated that 60 percent of the families living in the city making less than the median income and 25 percent of the total population lived in overcrowded conditions.

"Farm-worker housing is in short supply," said Johnson-Lyons. Where it exists, "it tends to be substandard and has not been a public or private priority for years."

And when there is an attempt to build in the urbanized areas, "NIMBY" (not-in-my-backyard) raises its head, Johnson-Lyons added.

"The NIMBY effort," said Johnson-Lyons, "impedes the construction of new farm-worker housing in Watsonville. A proposal by the Pajaro Valley Affordable Housing Corp. to build 24 units of farm-worker housing on East Lake Avenue has met with considerable resistance."