

AIRPORTS

Watsonville officials resist airport closing

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WATSONVILLE — It would take years and possibly cost millions of dollars to close Watsonville Municipal Airport, according to city and aviation officials.

There is no plan to shut down the airport, but some community activists have been targeting the 330-acre city-owned site as the prime spot to build a huge low-income housing project.

Led by community activists Frank Bardacke, Mike Kostyal and Robert Chacanaca, the low-income advocates are hoping to follow the precedent set by Santa Clara County concerning Reid-Hillview Airport.

Two weeks ago, the Board of Supervisors there voted 3-2 to shut that Airport.

The activists demanded the airport's closure here at several forums, most recently at a noisy hearing last week about forming a land-use commission to make recommendations about development around the airport to the City Council and Board of Supervisors.

The activists also made the airport a major issue of dispute at the Watsonville Housing Task Force meetings. Ultimately, no mention of the airport issue was in the task force's report.

The Watsonville Airport is a public facility, owned and maintained by the city. It was originally used by the military in World War II.

The Navy placed Watsonville on its list of auxiliary airports, and used it to train carrier air groups during the war. At the end of the war, the Naval Auxiliary Air Station returned the airport to the city's jurisdiction.

Airport Manager Kim Wirht said several lengthy and expensive

steps would have to be taken before the airport could be closed.

"I'm not sure how much money has been sunk into the airport by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration), but my guess is \$4 million to \$5 million, which would have to be repaid," she said.

An environmental impact report would be needed to assess the impacts of closing the airport, Wirht said.

There would likely be litigation from property owners, the business and aircraft owners opposed to the closure, and from the federal government over a deed restriction that requires the city to maintain the airport in the event of war.

"You wouldn't see anything built there for years," Wirht said.

The situation with the Watsonville Airport differs from Skypark Airport in Scotts Valley, which the city of Santa Cruz closed in December 1983.

One is that the Skypark wasn't identified on county or city general plans, whereas Watsonville's airport is contained in the city, county and Association of Monterey Bay Area Government plans.

Watsonville Airport is listed on state and federal aviation plans, but Skypark Airport wasn't.

Watsonville Airport has about 360 aircraft; Skypark had only 80.

Bardacke has said several times there is no legal barrier to closing the airport. He said the deed between the military and city of Watsonville does not contain any clause that would prevent closure.

But others disagree.

"I'm not a lawyer, and the language is vague. But there is a reversion clause, that in the event of war, the military can come in and take it," said Wirht.