

# Council decides to keep airport

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Watsonville Municipal Airport will not be shut down to be used for affordable housing.

That was the unanimous decision of the City Council, when, at Councilwoman Betty Murphy's prodding, it voted on the matter last night. The vote came after 4½ hours of discussion that ranged from the validity or lack of validity of a study on the airport to the need for affordable housing to the pitfalls of public assistance to the future of business in Watsonville.

The meeting was set up to review two reports: one released by AMBAG (the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments) on the economic contributions of local airports, and one specifically on the Watsonville Airport, put together by a citizens' committee that has been studying it for nine months. The committee was formed after local housing advocates began lobbying to close the

airport and use the land for low-cost housing.

Some councilmembers said they didn't see the need for the vote because the airport is already open and was really never seriously considered for closure. But Murphy said it was important to send a clear message to the community and to businesses in the city and those that may want to come to Watsonville that the airport is in no danger.

The issue of possible conversion to housing has been like "a sword of Damocles hanging over the airport," for nearly a year, she said.

Mayor Todd McFarren said he would have no problem voting to keep the airport open. But, he said, he's not convinced that it's a "viable municipal resource." The airport, he said, has "been asleep for the last 20 years" and needs revitalization.

At his suggestion, the council  
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also voted to have city staff come up with suggestions of ways to maximize the airport's potential.

After the vote, Airport Manager Kim Wirht said she felt relieved. She said it would be easier to get on with plans for the airport's future now that the question was settled.

Several of the councilmembers, and some of the housing advocates who had proposed the housing at the airport, warned that the issue of affordable housing would not go away as a result of the decision.

McFarren said he'd like to see the formation of "Watsonville Pilots for Affordable Housing," adding that he thought it was the pilots' "moral duty" to work on the issue.

"If we all put our minds to it we could come up with some creative solutions," he said. "This isn't the end of the story, it's the beginning."

Members of the Watsonville Housing Action Committee indicated earlier in the evening that they didn't really think the airport was going to be closed.

Mike Kostyal said his work on the project was "tangentially about the airport," but primarily about

making sure the matter of affordable housing got some attention.

The lack of popular support and political will for the airport's closure were also discussed earlier in the meeting.

McFarren questioned Frank Bardacke, one of the main promoters of "Airport Gardens," the proposed housing project, and a member of the airport study committee, about his statement that "sentimentality" was one of the main reasons people want to keep the airport.

The airport, McFarren said, "is also a popular institution ... it's something that's unique and peculiar to Watsonville. We take a certain pride in it ... People like it and

it's popular. Isn't that something that should be taken into account in a democracy?"

Bardacke agreed that it was and said that that would have to change before closing the airport became viable. But, he said, part of the reason for the airport's popularity rests with "the attitude that the political leaders of the community take."

Bardacke agreed with McFarren that housing advocates might have had more support for their idea if they'd worked with a broader group of people, but, he said, because of the council's attitude, many people said they didn't want to work on a project they "considered a loser."