

Few turn out to comment on crucial EIR

Hearing on effects of city's General Plan is held anyway

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Few people turned out last night to comment on an environmental impact report prepared for Watsonville's General Plan, but a motion to continue the hearing for more public input was turned down by the Planning Commission.

The commission was not scheduled to take action on the report, which was released to the public Jan. 7. Written comments received by the Planning Department by Feb. 26 and comments made by speakers at last night's meeting will be included and addressed in the final version of the report.

The report looks at potential negative impacts of the General Plan on the environment. The General Plan, which is in draft form now, maps out the city's growth through 2005. It also suggests mitigation measures for the impacts. According to the report, the only impact that cannot be mitigated is the loss of up to 580 acres of agricultural land.

The report looks at three population-growth scenarios: a 1 percent annual growth rate, a 1.8 percent growth rate and a 2.8 percent growth rate. A fourth option, also a 1.8 percent growth rate, considers building on land outside of the city limits on the west side of Lee Road. The EIR, which was written by San Jose-based CH2M Hill, finds that there may be significant impacts to the slough system even with mitigation measures in this option.

The commission was not scheduled to take any action on the environmental impact report. The hearing had been held only to get public input. Only six people addressed the commission on the report last night, a small number considering that between 80 and 100 people turned out for public hearings on the General Plan itself.

Commissioner Maria Corralejo suggested that the hearing be continued until the next commission meeting, March 1.

"I really believe there was not enough input from the public at large," she said.

Commissioner Robert Alcantara seconded the motion.

"I believe that the people should be given a second hearing ... the community participation was not enough," he said.

Alcantara said he thought the city should better advertise the continued hearing.

Commissioner John Gilford voted with Corralejo and Alcantara,

but the remaining four commissioners voted against the motion, saying they thought there had been adequate input and that they wanted the process to move along.

Among the comments was support for building in the Lee Road area. Tina Quinn, a consultant from the San Francisco-based company Sustainable Conservation said she believed that building on the sloughy area could be done in such a way as to improve the wetlands. Quinn has been hired by developer Tai Associates to work on a proposed 1,800-housing unit project in the area. Quinn's company would advise the developer on such matters as slough preservation and enhancement.

Attorney Omar James also spoke in favor of some building in that area, saying that building there, in the Buena Vista area and on the Franich property would be the best way to preserve prime agricultural lands. James has been involved in a subcommittee of the Economic Development Department that studied the General Plan.

Mike Kostyal took the EIR to task on several counts, including the fact that the General Plan would result in a diminution of the city's green belt on the east side and that the proposal to increase Holohan Road by two lanes would take away more farm land. Neither impact was addressed in the EIR, he said. Kostyal also said the area south of Corralitos Creek was an important groundwater-recharge area, and that the EIR needed to take that into consideration.

He said he was impressed with the amount of high-density housing proposed in the plan, but said considering the housing shortage, he saw no reason for any low-density housing to be built.

"Isn't it time to phase out low-density housing?" he asked.

Dick Bernard, a member of Watsonville Wetlands Watch, said he had a problem with how general many of the recommended mitigations are. Many, he said, say things should be monitored or procedures will be followed.

"What procedures? By whom? To what degree?" he asked.

Watsonville resident and former mayoral candidate Robert Chacanaca said he thought the annexation process should be put to a vote of the people.

The final environmental impact report and the General Plan could be back before the Planning Commission for action by April, Planning Director Maureen Owen said.