

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Airplanes sit at the Watsonville Municipal Airport on Monday. Some residents who live north and west of the airport worry about the possibility of airport expansion. The Watsonville City Council will hear public comments about airport growth at a meeting today at 6:30 p.m.

Council tackles future airport growth

Public comment sought on Watsonville's plans for expansion

By **BRIAN SEALS**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — City leaders are mulling how Watsonville Municipal Airport should grow during the next 20 years, while some neighbors are questioning whether the pre-World War II air strip should continue to exist at all.

The airport plans include expanding the existing terminal, adding hangars, and possibly developing industrial space. The City Council will hear public comment on the potential environmental impacts of the proposal during its 6:30 p.m. meeting today. The council could approve the plan as early as Jan. 28.

No one seriously expects the airport to close up shop anytime soon. It's home to about 326 aircraft and an array of businesses. About 92 percent of those who keep a plane or helicopter at the airport live in Santa Cruz County, according to a draft of the airport blueprint.

However, the anti-airport sentiment that surfaced in the early 1990s lingers, with some critics saying the airport's 344 acres

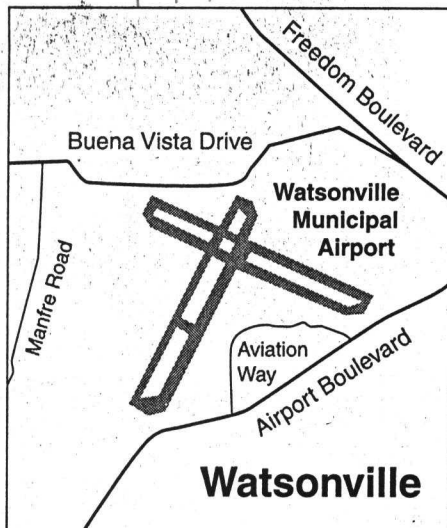
could be put to better use, especially in an area where buildable land is at a premium. Critics also say the planes are too noisy and disrupt life in the nearby neighborhoods, which include a string of schools.

"I think the land could be better used," said longtime airport critic Bernie Feldman, who concedes it's unlikely elected officials will convert the land. "What we're going to call for is to be prudent in spending money out there."

In the meantime, Feldman and his group, Citizens Opposed to Airport Expansion, have challenged the proposal's environmental report, especially a plan to extend the primary runway, citing noise as a problem.

Watsonville resident Peter Nichols also has raised noise concerns, writing to the city that an "independent, on-the-ground noise-level evaluation must be preserved."

The runway extension also would endanger pilots, the opposition group said, because birds drawn to the airport from the nearby Buena Vista dump already pose challenges to pilots.



Jo Ann Kolonick/Sentinel

To airport backers, though, the new projects would make the airport a better one. They say the facility isn't just a rich man's

Please see **AIRPORT** on **BACK PAGE**

Airport

Continued from Page A1

playground but a business asset.

While just how many businesses regularly use the airport is a point of debate between opponents and supporters, some businesses say the facility is crucial to their operations.

Sam Bishop, president of TOTLCOM Inc., said Monday he uses the airport to shuttle between his five Northern California offices. He employs 25 in his Watsonville headquarters.

"I don't know how I'd run a small business with multiple locations without the airport," Bishop said. "The amount of time I'd spend on the road is atrocious."

He called the proposed projects minor. The longer runway would enable pilots to adjust their landing approach and avoid flying over the still-under-construction Pajaro Valley High School, he said.

Gary Darrigo, owner of Coastwide Environmental Technologies, said his business

needs quick transportation to inspect potential job sites. He concedes he uses the airport for leisure, too, but estimates that up to 40 percent of his flights are business-related.

"It's critical to me," said Darrigo, whose company does hazard-materials work for companies and employs about 40. "I could reduce my gross sales and reduce my number of employees by not going after work that is farther afield."

Like Bishop, he said some of the projects would make the airport safer, including a plan to upgrade landing instruments.

City Councilmen Antonio Rivas, whose Third District includes the airport, said he hears from some constituents who say the airport could be converted to another use, but is much more likely to hear concerns about safety.

"The concerns are mainly about safety and noise," Rivas said. "We're going to study it to make sure it is safe and self-sufficient."

Among the estimated \$13.5 million in pro-

'I don't know how I'd run a small business with multiple locations without the airport. The amount of time I'd spend on the road is atrocious.'

SAM BISHOP, TOTLCOM INC.

jects on tap over the next 20 years:

- Lengthening the primary runway by 800 feet. Officials say that would allow planes that already use the airport to carry bigger payloads. The expansion does not call for erecting a tower nor does it allow for larger planes to land. The largest planes that can land there now are turbo-prop and turbine-powered business jets.

- Expanding the terminal building by about 3,000 square feet.

- Adding about 100 more hangars.

- Development of a business park on the west side of the airport.

The last master plan for the airport covered 1986 to 2006.

"The 2006 plan, project-wise, is about the same as this new one," airport manager Don French said. "It just makes it more user friendly for people flying in."

The latest version of the airport plan has taken some twists and turns. The area is home to the endangered Santa Cruz County tarplant, the discovery of which prompted a more in-depth environmental review of the site. The airport's plan will have to satisfy federal and state regulators that any impacts to the tarplant have been mitigated.

Contact Brian Seals at
bseals@santa-cruz.com.