

OPEC meeting in Vienna today to
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There is an agreement

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Airport housing advocates worried

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

People who advocate closing Watsonville Municipal Airport to build low-cost housing there said yesterday that they are concerned that the idea won't be fully discussed.

Frank Bardacke, who teaches at Radcliff Adult School, and other members of the Watsonville Housing Action Committee called a press conference yesterday to respond to Watsonville city staff reports on the feasibility of closing the airport and to a letter made public last week from the Federal Aviation Administration.

The three reports, written by City Attorney Luis Hernandez, Finance Director Terry Stigall and Airport Manager Kim Wirht, looked at the economic impact of the airport, on the city and the possible legal difficulties the city could have if it closes the airport.

Stigall's and Wirht's reports said the airport was an important economic asset to the city and an important transportation link. The letter from FAA official John L. Pfeifer, dated July 9 and released to the public last week, essentially

told the city that various agreements with the federal government would make closing the airport nearly impossible. Hernandez's report made similar findings.

The reports were prepared for the City Council, which is scheduled to discuss the airport at its meeting at 4 p.m. today. Summarizing the reports in a memo to the council, Interim City Manager Chuck Comstock recommended that "the airport remain as a major link to the transportation system and a viable asset to the City of Watsonville." He, along with Stigall, recommended a further economic impact study in order to look at ways of increasing the revenue the airport brings to the city.

Bardacke said he thought things might not be as cut and dried as Pfeifer of the FAA said. Pfeifer's letter says that when the city acquired the airport from the Navy it agreed to certain conditions in the Surplus Property Act of 1948.

Although the buildings and runways were built by the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the FAA's predecessor, and improvements

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An idea for change at airport

Frank Bardacke said his group, the Watsonville Housing Action Committee, hasn't always "hated the airport."

Bardacke said that for a while now, the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau and the local League of United Latin American Citizens have recommended putting in housing on the city's northwest edge in order to meet their dual goals of preserving prime agricultural land and providing housing.

But Bardacke said a number of projects proposed for that side of town were voted down because of conflicts with the airport. Then, Bardacke said, some people started to take a look at whether the airport was really needed.

Bardacke said his group was working with an architect to come up with some preliminary ideas for how the 330 airport acres could be developed, and that those ideas would be circulated for public comment.

Bardacke said he thinks the city could sell part of the land to the state for a new high school and possibly an elementary school, raising some money to pay off the FAA and develop the land for low-cost housing. Other portions could be sold to non-profit organizations or developers to build moderate-cost or even market-level housing, generating more money for the city, he said.

Bardacke pictures a development that would include a mix of housing, parks, streets, sidewalks, laundries and other service-oriented services.

"We could make it into something beautiful," he said.

Bardacke said he thinks that once the community gets accurate information about what the airport contributes now and what could be there instead, his idea will garner a broader base of support than it now has.

-Chela Zabin.

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were made by the Navy, Bardacke pointed out that the airport land was originally owned by the city, purchased after voters approved a bond issue that raised \$125,000.

Although Pfeifer's letters said that the conditions agreed to "shall be deemed to be covenants running with the land," Bardacke said it doesn't make sense that the federal government would put restrictions on land owned by the city. He said could find nothing in the copy of the lease between the Navy and the city that indicates that the conditions agreed to apply to the airport land.

"The buildings were paid for by the government," he said, "but the land belongs to us."

Pfeifer's letter also said that the only way the city could be freed from its obligation to maintain the airport would be if it could be shown that doing so will benefit civil aviation.

Bardacke said he thinks that's "too tough a test" to apply to airport closings. The only way an airport could close under those conditions, Bardacke said, is if it were dangerous or if another, better airport were to be built nearby. He also said that Pfeifer's letter "is one letter from one guy in the FAA." Other FAA officials might have a different view, he said.

Although Pfeifer said that the city would have to pay the FAA

tions would end under Saddam's

back for money the agency put into the airport, Bardacke said the city of Santa Cruz didn't have to do so when it closed Skyview Airport. Santa Cruz had received money from the FAA for airport studies, although not for airport improvements. But Bardacke said airport studies paid for by the FAA were included in the list of grants Pfeifer included in his letter to the city.

What it all comes down to, Bardacke said, is that "the city of Watsonville has to do what they think is the best thing to do with (the airport) ... then they should start negotiations ... the discussion shouldn't be closed" because of the initial negative findings.

Bardacke said his group thinks the city should set up a study commission to look into the matter further. The airport may make significant financial contributions to the city's economy, Bardacke said, but it's important to weigh those against the city's other needs.

The Watsonville Housing Action Committee, which member Mike Kostyal said had eight to 10 regular members, also called for the 12 empty FEMA trailers to be used for people now staying in motels through the motel voucher program. The trailers have been emptied by people who have moved into permanent housing. Kostyal said the committee would consider "doing whatever it takes to prevent the removal of the trailers ... if we have to organize people to lie down in front of the trailers to stop them from being removed."