

# Watsonville bars Console's bid to increase commercial zoning

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By JAMIE MARKS

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WATSONVILLE — The City Council rejected Mort Console's request Tuesday night to rezone much of his 35.5-acre property on North Main Street into more commercial land.

Bowing to pressure from downtown merchants, and feeling the pinch from increased traffic on north Main Street and a lack of housing in the city, the council voted 6-1 to keep the commercial property at its present five acres, instead of the 14.7 acres proposed by Console, former owner of the now-defunct Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co.

No development has been formally proposed for the property. The land is among the Console family holdings that were signed over as collateral to Wells Fargo Bank when Watsonville Canning went bankrupt.

"I have a difficult time reducing residential land for commercial land," said Mayor Ann Soldo in forging the consensus against a major change in the general plan and zoning.

But the council compromised on the issue of residential zoning. They maintained all of the usable residential land in residential zoning, but they increased the density on 21 acres from low to medium. The change will allow up to 10 houses per acre.

The remainder of the land will be in open space because of Harkins Slough, or dedicated to the proposed Landmark Parkway, expected to carry as many as 23,000 cars a day when and if all the proposed development in the area is built.

The commercial land approved by the council will act as a buffer between the road and the housing.

This was the second time the Console plan had been before the council. The last time it came forward, the council split 4-3 to turn down the request.

Mayor Soldo forged the new alliance, with the only dissenting vote cast by Councilwoman Betty Murphy, who said she couldn't support any zoning increase until appropriate road improvements are in place for Harkins Slough Road and the Green Valley Road corridor.

The traffic problems were one reason the council decided to keep most of the property in residential development, instead of commercial, as Console had wanted.

Soldo pointed out that four large projects are pending approval in that area, and that the traffic projections showed the key arteries — Main Street, Harkins Slough and Green Valley roads — would drop to a "level of service" of "F" or "D," on a scale on which "A" is the highest and "F" is total gridlock.

City Manager John Radin tried to assure Soldo that the traffic wouldn't be quite as bad as predicted. He said he plans to submit a plan in summer whereby all the property owners along the affected roadways will put up the money to begin construction on some of the major improvements needed, instead of waiting for the city to collect the fees from developers.

He said the property owners realize some of the road improvements — particularly a new onramp to Highway 1 from Green Valley Road — will help their business.

Councilmembers were concerned that approving Console's request for a large commercial area would result in something other than just a commercial buffer strip between the residential area and the proposed Landmark Parkway.

The Watsonville Square Shopping Center, just across the street on Main Street, is only 12 acres in size. Console had been proposing 14.7 acres of commercial land.

The five acres allowed for commercial development will be divided along both sides of the proposed parkway.

Andy Blake of the Central Business Improvement District urged the council to reject the plan. He said the traffic would be bad, and it would detract from the downtown businesses.