

Growth

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Watsonville Has Some Real Growing Pains

First Of Three Articles

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The City of Watsonville is at an important crossroads.

Population in the city and its surrounding area is growing at an astronomical rate. Low-to-moderate income housing is critically lacking, with current housing costs skyrocketing higher every day. Economically-important agricultural lands could very well be threatened, along with necessary police, fire and water services in the city itself.

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Clearly, the proud community faces a crucial challenge, but one that city officials feel they are well prepared to meet.

"I think that everybody would like to have things just like they were 20 years ago, but we can't have it that way anymore — especially when you look and see people living in cars and three or four families to a small home. You

can't accept that, something has to be done," said Watsonville Mayor William "Bill" Johnston.

The majority of the problems arise from Watsonville's phenomenal growth in recent years. In 1970 the city contained 14,569 persons according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 1978 that figure had increased to 20,550, for a total eight-year increase of 5,981 — just over 40 percent.

That population increase was equivalent to growth from 1930 to 1970, a period of 40 years and a rate roughly four times as fast as the 10-year period preceding it.

The active growth that the city and its surrounding areas have been experiencing in recent years is expected to continue into the future, but at a much slower pace, according to a recently published community planning area report. The report states that nearly all of this population increase can be traced to immigration from surrounding counties and a significant occurrence known as the Fresno Phenomenon.

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Watsonville Has Pains

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Stated simply, the Fresno Phenomenon is the increased immigration of agricultural farmworkers into the Watsonville area. In the 1970s, due to increased agricultural mechanization, jobs were reduced so quickly that in a few short years the Western migrant army of 300,000 workers was cut in half. As social services waned in the cities these out-of-work families settled in, the pressure forced yet another movement as these people migrated west into the Los Angeles basin and north into Monterey County and the Pajaro Valley.

The Fresno Phenomenon has hit the City of Watsonville and built up into a major cultural shock effect, according to a recent city planning commission report. In the past 10 years the city has experienced profound social, economic and cultural changes.

With this growth in population has come just as large an increase in building, development and urbanization. From 1970-78 the amount of dwelling units in the city has increased by 43 percent. With this accelerated growth the amount of vacant, buildable acres has dwindled quickly, and developers are beginning to look outside the city for cheaper, buildable land.

"I think there is a danger of the development outstripping our services," said Watsonville City Manager James Buell. "How rapidly can we expand our water services? We already have a traffic problem downtown. Can we keep pace with our police and fire departments? These are important questions that need to be answered."

Building permit activity during the 1960s resulted in an average of only 57 new residential units a year. During the first half of the '70s, the yearly average rose to 283 with a high of 485 dwelling units in 1977. In 1970 there were 5,209 dwelling units in the city, which expanded quickly to 7,474 in 1978, an increase of approximately 43 percent.

The city has attacked the problem in two ways. First, it has called for new growth studies on sewer, water, highway and recreational lands. Second, and most important, it has installed a six-month building moratorium on most residential and commercial development.

At the time the moratorium was put into effect, permits to build over 2,000 units had been applied for. If growth had been allowed to proceed at such a rate, every square foot of residentially-zoned land in the city would have been used up within a period of seven years. Clearly, if action had not been taken, "We couldn't go on, we would be dead," Mayor Johnston said.

One of the main reasons the moratorium was deemed necessary by city officials was because Watsonville does not have a growth management program on the books with which to fight runaway growth, said City Planner Robert Ellenwood.

"I feel rather confident that the city at large and the whole political body here would like Watsonville to stabilize and not go into a high rate of development. Nobody wants Watsonville to sacrifice quality to accommodate developers

who have access to land. The community wants good quality development at a good and safe pace. They don't want to stop development completely," Ellenwood said.

"In terms of perspective, Watsonville represents the last real center of potential development around. Watsonville was the last real area with no announced growth control measure. There's just no place else for them to build. This is the only game left in town," Buell explained.

Formal adoption of a growth control measure in the City of Watsonville appears to be not only welcomed by city officials, but by area citizens as well. In a special housing survey sponsored by the city planning department last Spring, 83 percent of those responding stated that they favored some type of growth management program.

"I think we more or less have one going right now with our building moratorium. Our ability to handle services just about makes mandatory a growth management program. Just because we have some land available doesn't mean we're going to be run roughshod by these contractors over the hill. I think our growth will be managed by our ability to service our needs, not by the whims of the contractors," Mayor Johnston said.

Most city officials said they believed the most probable growth management program would be one of limiting the number of building permits granted each year. The number granted would attempt to parallel the growth rate of the state of California overall.

In addition to a formal growth management program, the practices of in-fill and the use of bypassed lands must be utilized, planning officials said. All of these measures are necessary in order to insure protection of fertile agricultural lands from development, which other areas in the state have found to be an easy solution to the problems of runaway growth.

However, due to the value of these agricultural lands to the economy of Watsonville and Santa Cruz County, they must continue to be protected from development and urbanization, city officials said.

"We have a very big natural barrier to our growth and that is the agricultural lands. There is a feeling in the council and in the public sector not to use up the prime agricultural land," City Manager Buell said. "Watsonville will continue to grow in the next few years, but its going to grow more slowly than in the past."

Despite this urban growth in development experienced in the '70s, major housing problems remain. Approximately 13 percent of the housing in Watsonville is deemed substandard. The vacancy rate in the city still stands at less than 1 percent, driving costs even higher.

Currently half of the low-income federally subsidized housing in Santa Cruz County lies in the Watsonville area and it is still far from adequate. In addition, planning department estimates list over half of the households in the city as unable to afford a rent of \$275 for a two-bedroom apartment.

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