

# Feasibility study of senior center merger proposed

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STAFF WRITER

A city-county committee should be formed to study the feasibility of merging Watsonville's two senior centers, the county Seniors Commission recommended yesterday.

The commission's discussion, which drew 20 people to the Live Oak Senior Center, brought up an issue that has kept popping up since Watsonville's second senior center opened a decade ago.

There are two centers, the Watsonville Senior Center, city-owned building on East Fifth Street, which was once a church, and the Watsonville International Senior Center, in much smaller quarters on East Beach Street.

Commissioners asked that the feasibility-study committee be headed by Ray Belgard, county supervisor for the Pajaro Valley, and that representatives of the City Council, the Seniors Commission, the two senior centers and the Area Agency on Aging be included. Belgard had already indicated a willingness to head the committee.

The Area Agency on Aging is a state-funded agency that contracts with Food and Nutrition Services, of Aptos, to operate the meals program and other programs at the international center.

The feasibility study was proposed by Seniors commissioner Henry Garrison, of Watsonville, who prepared a preliminary report on the merger idea. The Seniors Commission can only recommend; it has no power in the merger issue.

The Watsonville Senior Center on Fifth Street is large enough to handle all the people who go to both centers, Garrison said, and a merger would save "several thousand dollars a month." A merger would mean closing the international center.

The clientele at the two centers

is drawn somewhat along racial lines — the Watsonville Senior Center is mainly Anglo, and the International Center has a high percentage of minorities.

But the lines are not solid. People go back and forth between the centers for meals, depending on the lunch menu, and bilingual workers go to both centers. The International Center serves 80 meals a day; the Watsonville center serves 120.

Commissioner Mabel Henri expressed concern that a merger of the two centers might cause some International Center clients to feel left out.

"Do you think they will come? It's awfully important," she said to Jim Carter, a member of the Watsonville Senior Center board of directors.

"Maybe a half-dozen won't come" Carter said.

Most of those who spoke yesterday were from the Watsonville Senior Center. There was no opposition to the idea of a merger, but several speakers said patrons at the two centers haven't been given the whole story yet.

"Most of our people have not been approached," said Barbara Davis, executive director of the Watsonville Senior Center, and some "sort of have the feeling of being left out."

Commissioner Lue Hartney, who cast the only vote against proceeding with the study, said she was tired of seeing "people at the top" making all the decisions and supported having the issue go to the membership of the centers.

Lisa Berkowitz, of the Food and Nutrition staff, said her agency has already participated in some discussions about merging programs. Food and Nutrition, she said, is committed to providing meals, nutritional education and other programs to its clients.