

Planning  
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# Watsonville faces crisis of growth

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Estimates regarding Watsonville's population in the year 2005 may be pure speculation at this point, but members of the General Plan steering committee are certain of this: People will continue to move here and they will need places to live.

The committee met yesterday at City Hall to continue its year-long effort to map out where the city will grow and how it will accommodate an influx of people in need of housing.

The committee's own estimate puts Watsonville's 2005 population at 67,000. The Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments set the figure at 56,000.

That the figures differ is of little importance to Watsonville Planning Director Bud Carney, who said the number could go as high as 71,000 if the city continues its current rate of growth.

The bottom line for Carney and the steering committee is that the city will continue to grow, and affordable housing, already scarce, will become even scarcer.

"What has happened in Watsonville is that it used to take 10 years to add 1,000 people to the population," Carney said, "and now we add 1,000 people every year."

The committee must try to

devise a plan that will provide areas for new housing and especially areas of affordable housing, he said.

Statistics compiled by the city show that while 6 percent of all occupied housing units in the county are classified as overcrowded, 17 percent of occupied housing units in Watsonville are overcrowded. Also, more than 30 percent of all households in Watsonville report annual incomes that place them in the "very low" income category.

The statistics point to a need for "affordable" housing, a difficult term to define, and one that creates special planning problems for the General Plan steering committee.

"What is affordable housing?" Carney said. "We need to define what it is and address it. It is a very serious problem."

The steering committee has addressed the problem in its General Plan proposals by devising different growth possibilities, or "scenarios."

The committee's first completed scenario raised another question of importance pertaining to growth: Can the city provide adequate (and affordable) housing without destroying or disrupting agricultural land?

The scenario called for 953 acres outside of the area embraced by current planning to be used for 4,765 housing

units. However, the committee decided that the conversion would mean the loss of too much farm land and moved on to the next plan.

Scenario two called for the reduction of the 953 acres in the first scenario to 685, a reduction of 28 percent, and an increase in housing density.

Still unsatisfied, the committee is working on a third plan.

The committee faces the challenge of overlapping problems. Annexing land outside of city limits for development may relieve housing pressures but could destroy prime agricultural land and create a conflict with the county, which would be responsible for providing certain services.

On the other side, an increase in the development of downtown housing could lead to high levels of traffic congestion.

"Sixty-seven thousand people mean 120,000 cars," Steering Committee Chairman John Kane said. "It would mean tremendous transportation problems."

Kane also expressed concern over Watsonville's potential as a "bedroom" community serving commuters to the southern San Francisco Bay Area. He said that the development of large plots for single family homes could lure workers from the South Bay, who would use city services but not put anything back into the city's economy.

Another population-related factor that could change the General Plan would be the need for more schools. The steering committee decided it would urge representatives from the Pajaro Valley School District to attend a future meeting to discuss where future school sites might be located.

The committee will meet again Dec. 2.