

Airport manager's job may be eliminated

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WATSONVILLE — A proposal by City Manager Steve Salomon to cut costs at Watsonville Airport would leave airport manager Kim Wirht without a job.

The plan, which could save the city about \$100,000, will be considered by City Council members Tuesday. The airport, where 300 aircraft are kept, hasn't broken even financially for the past eight years.

Wirht, who has been airport manager for nearly five years, receives \$65,000 annually in salary and benefits.

Salomon said elimination of the airport manager's position had nothing to do with Wirht's work performance.

Wirht, 37, was airport manager of the Hollister airport before coming to Watsonville. She could not be reached for comment Friday.

The airport is operated under an enterprise account, which means that it should pay for itself without requiring money from the city's general fund.

But for the past eight years, the airport has had an annual shortfall ranging from \$73,000 to \$159,000, according to a staff memo. The city has picked up the tab.

The requirement that the airport be self-sustaining was approved by council members in early 1991, and took effect for the 1991-1992 fiscal year, Salomon said.

"The airport is being held to a different standard now than it has in the past," Salomon said Friday. "We try to make sure the enterprise accounts pay for themselves, but they haven't always been able to."

Other enterprise funds include solid waste, water and wastewater accounts.

Salomon said because of the recession and fewer city revenues, improving the airport's finances has become more urgent.

Though the airport has been able to cover its day-to-day expenses, Salomon said, insurance and improvement costs have been paid for by the city.

Under the reorganization, the airport staff would shrink from seven to four, leaving two fuel at-

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tendants, a secretary and an airport operations supervisor. The two other eliminated positions are vacant at this time, Salomon said.

Administrative positions would be filled by Assistant City Manager Gary Smith, who has been overseeing the airport's management, and the city's assistant fire chief Don French, who would handle routine operations.

The finance and public works departments also would play a role in aspects of the airport's management, under Salomon's plan.

By installing a self-fueling island at the airport, eliminating the manager's position and bringing leases for hangars up to a market rate, Salomon projected that \$100,000-\$150,000 could be saved.

The self-fueling station has already been approved by council members and awaits construction, Salomon said. Once it is in place, the need for staff will decrease, he said.

Salomon also has proposed that an airport advisory committee be formed to keep an eye on operations.