

**Watsonville: 2005**

# Committee focuses on farm land

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The preservation of agricultural land headlined concerns last night about Watsonville's General Plan update.

Responding to a Santa Cruz County Planning Department criticism that the city's General Plan update "lacks policy base for regulations necessary to preserve agricultural land," John Kane, chairman of the committee working on the update, said, "How strong can we get on that?"

The desire to preserve farmland has been mentioned at every meeting of the General Plan Steering Committee, he said.

The steering committee has been working on the update, called Watsonville: 2005, for nearly three years, but met for the first time last night after a six-month hiatus. The reason for the hiatus was that work related to the environmental review process has taken a long time to complete.

The major task for planners now is the Environmental Impact Report, expected to be completed in June. Public

meetings on Watsonville: 2005 and its EIR are scheduled for July, with formal public hearings and adoption scheduled for August. The purpose of last night's meeting was to review criticisms and proposed changes to Watsonville: 2005.

The longest list of criticisms was received from county planners, who stressed the need for more detail on farm land preservation and greenbelts between urban and agricultural areas.

Watsonville Planning Director Bud Carney responded that the preservation of farm land is one of the city's highest priorities. Further, if the county were really serious about preserving farm land, it would place a moratorium on development outside the city, he said.

"They're moving ahead full force and they're allowing all kinds of development out there," he said.

The result, he said, are "urban islands" such as the housing built near Pinto Lake just outside the city limits. Carney said Watsonville would eventually have to provide city services to developments like that.

"The county is doing just the opposite of what they are criticizing everyone about," he said.

Watsonville: 2005 describes establishment of an "urban limit line," or greenbelt, beyond which urban uses of land would be prohibited. Discussion and adoption of the urban limit line is scheduled for the steering committee's March 22 and April 5 meetings.

The preservation of agricultural land was also addressed by Tony Campos, city councilman and steering committee member, who revived the idea of residential development west of Highway 1.

The committee ruled that idea out last summer for a variety of reasons, including that the highway forms a boundary between farm land and the city, and that the cost of extending urban services would be too high.

Campos said it should be reconsidered, in light of the county's fight with Watsonville over the proposed annexation of attorney Tony Franich's East Lake Avenue apple orchard.

The county has been pressuring the city to consider alternatives to the Franich annexation, but the city has battled for reassurance it would not be required to annex property that would cost more to develop.

"We're going to be fighting that forever," Campos said, "because it's become a political battle now."

He said developers' fees could pay for extending city services, but Mayor Betty Murphy objected that the fees wouldn't cover other requirements, such as for recreation, police service and fire protection. Furthermore, the land is in the Coastal Zone and falls under the tighter development restrictions of coastal regulations, she said.

Committee chairman Kane directed Campos to return with a plan for residential development west of the highway at the next meeting, if he wants the committee to consider his suggestions.

Watsonville attorney Tom Skillicorn, in a letter to city planners, also argued for considering residential development west of the highway.