

# Watsonville eyeing wetlands for housing

By TRACY L. BARNETT

Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — City planners are eyeing a 600-acre site that could ease the county's low-income housing crunch, but the plan faces what will undoubtedly be a long and heated battle.

Development of the tract known as the Tai property represents the only realistic hope that the city will be able to accommodate the overwhelming need for farmworker housing in the county, according to city planners.

Developers of the tract, which is bordered by Harkins Slough Road on the north and Lee Road on the east, have promised to designate 50 percent of an estimated 1,800 homes as low-income housing — still only a fraction of the more than 5,000 the city will need by 2005.

The city Planning Commission

heard from Tai Associates representative Steve Hixson in a study session Monday, as the city prepares to tackle upcoming hearings on the issue. Those meetings, scheduled to begin in November or December, promise to be at least as heated as those surrounding the annexation of the 216-acre Riverside properties where the city plans to build an industrial park. And unlike the Riverside properties, the Tai tract hasn't even been included in the city's sphere of influence — meaning that the developers must persuade the City Council to take the first step of including it in the general plan.

Part of the opposition to the development stems from the fact that the property is laced with sensitive wetlands areas. Bordered by the Watsonville Slough to the south and Harkins Slough to the west,

Please see WETLANDS — BACK PAGE

## Wetlands

Continued from Page A1

and bisected by Struve and Hansen sloughs, the property lies at the heart of a rich wildlife habitat.

Although the agricultural land on the site isn't considered to be prime soil, it contains probably the largest contiguous tract of certified organic farmland in the area. Watsonville Wetlands Watch has drawn its battle line at Highway 1, and threatens to fight any major expansion of the city's boundaries to the west of that line. And since it's in the coastal zone, any project will require the approval of the state Coastal Commission, which has a long history of reluctance to allow large-scale developments in that zone.

"But after years of discussions during adoption of the city's general plan, Watsonville planners have repeatedly run up against walls in every direction as they've tried to incorporate space for the enormous influx of farmworkers into the area. Residents in the Buena Vista area lobbied heavily against annexation of a tract north of the city for any kind of development. Farmers nixed the development of prime ag land on the west side.

After a 14-year battle, the city is prepared to move ahead on development of the Franich property, which will include an estimated nine acres of affordable housing. But even with the development of the Franich property, and even if the city is able to encourage devel-

opers to build the maximum amount of affordable housing possible on other available property within the city limits, Watsonville will fall some 1,800 units short of meeting the anticipated farmworker housing needs, according to city planners.

The number of farmworkers in Santa Cruz County has leaped to meet the need of an increasingly labor-intensive local agricultural industry. The shift from apple orchards to strawberry fields has brought an estimated 6,500 new workers into the county in the past 13 years — plus their children.

"Where are you going to put those people?" Omar James asked the planning commission Monday. "These are the kinds of homes you need: affordable housing."

A county farmworker housing needs report released in 1993 estimated the county already was 2,200 units short of the existing need. Inner-city schools are jammed to the breaking point, people are living in garages and packing as many as five families to a house, and many are living in substandard conditions, such as the San Andreas Labor Camp. Yet a report released last week by a county committee addressing the problem sets a goal of producing 200 new units by 2000 — leaving the bulk of the problem in the lap of Watsonville planners.

A few statistics from a 1993 report by Watsonville's planning de-

partment illustrates the depth of the crisis:

- Except for a small area in Capitola Village, Watsonville has by far the highest density in the county. Even given the fact that many undocumented people avoid census counts, a conservative estimate put Watsonville's density at about 6,000 people per square mile — compared to 3,700 in Santa Cruz.

- Watsonville also has the lowest per-capita income, pointing to the need for subsidized housing. The average farmworker family earns \$1,174 per month. Median family income in Watsonville is \$31,160, compared with \$43,130 countywide.

- An estimated 26 percent of all households were overcrowded, and 39 percent of all rental units. That compares with 7 percent of Santa Cruz households.

So city planners are looking to the Tai proposal as a way to even the odds — provided they can persuade the City Council, the Coastal Commission, the Local Agency Formation Commission and an assorted variety of opponents.

"There are no other areas available that can accommodate the housing needs of the city," said Charlie Eadie, who heads city planning efforts. "The point is if you don't do that, what you're going to get is five units here and 10 units there, and that doesn't add up to the demand that's already existing based on the shift we've had in agriculture."