

Watsonville planners OK new motel permit

By JAMIE MARKS

Sentinel Staff Writer

WASONVILLE — Maybe two permits is what the Comfort Suites motel needs to get off the ground.

Developers of the Comfort Suites motel project at Green Valley Road, just off Highway 1, had let their previous use permit expire and had failed to seek an extension. So Monday night they were back at the Planning Commission, asking for a new permit.

They got it.

The project is one of three motels being planned for a two-mile stretch of Highway 1, which continues to trouble some planning commissioners and council members. An economic viability study commissioned by two of the developers showed Watsonville could only support one new motel of about 100 rooms.

On the drawing boards are three motels of nearly 300 rooms.

Despite a pending change in their partnership, the Comfort Suites developer appears bound and determined to go ahead with their 78-room motel, restaurant and conference facility.

The Comfort Suites project is closest to actual construction, because it has already cleared design review — the last planning hurdle. The new permit won't affect its design review status.

But that hasn't dissuaded the other projects. Developers of a Ramada Inn at West Beach Street and Lee Road, and a 100-room motel at the freeway west of Airport Boulevard are also gearing up to build this spring. They've each received go-aheads from the City Council recently, but still need to pass design review.

Planning Commission Chairman Nat Bua asked the Comfort Suites representative, John Fry, about the economic viability of the project.

"It's a horse race and whoever ... pours the first foundation will win," said Fry. "I wouldn't want to be second."

"Or third," added Bua.

Asked by Planning Commissioner Tony Campos if the Comfort Suites project is in financial trouble, Fry said, "There are a lot of rumors, and like most rumors there's some truth to them.

"There's been a change in the

partnership, with one group trying to buy out the other," he said. "It's a question of which of two groups will build it. But it will be built."

The Comfort Suites project was originally intended as an 83-room motel, but it has been changed to 78 suite-type rooms.

The project is among several required to contribute to a new freeway on-ramp at Green Valley Road. Fry said he's not sure when Caltrans intends to build the freeway access.

In another matter, the Planning Commission again delayed hearing a rezoning request for the Starlite Drive-in, which the Pajaro Valley School District wants to use for a new elementary school.

Property owner Henry Garcia wants to increase the residential zoning from medium- to high-density. The Planning Department staff opposes the move, because of the school district's interest in the land and because the rezoning would increase the population by 43 percent.

Monday night, in a letter to the commission, Garcia asked for a delay in the matter. He has postponed the issue several other times as well.