

Land could be used for homes, group says

Sell airport, Watsonville urged



Conversion could raise \$10 million, supporters claim

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Airports
WATSONVILLE — The county's only airport should be converted to industry, schools, housing, recreation and parks that could raise \$10 million a year in revenues, according to a report from a group that wants to shut down Watsonville Airport.

The report, to be released Wednesday, also says that the city-owned facility is not self-supporting and is not a significant economic factor for city businesses.

Don French, airport manager, rebuts the conclusions and says the airport continues to suc-

ceed because it does pay for itself. In addition, it brings in more than \$19 million a year, according to French, citing earlier studies, and is expected to increase with the construction of more hangars.

The Watsonville Airport Study Committee — a subcommittee of the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley Farmlands and Wetlands — conducted its study over a 12-month period and has compiled a 17-page report concluding that the airport conversion would not only bring more revenue to the area, but also more than 3,000 jobs to the city.

The committee said that in its study of 50 hours of flight activity, it found a 2-to-1 ratio of

weekend to weekday operations, which proves the airport is used more for recreational than business purposes. And that, according to the committee, proves the airport is not beneficial to the city's businesses.

Bernie Feldman, a committee participant, said his group believes the airport land could benefit the city better by being used in other ways.

"We do have an ax to grind," he said. "We believe that land belongs to the city, but we did an objective study whereas previous studies have all been biased for the airport. This report is an

A private plane takes off from the Watsonville Airport on Monday.

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educational project because we realize we are working against a sacred cow here."

The Airport Study Committee included Feldman, Jerry Thomas, Frank Bardacke and John Borrego.

The issues presented in the report are nothing new and are flawed, said French.

"It doesn't surprise me at all," French said Monday when told of the report's conclusions. "I think there is a lot more support in this community for the airport. It truly is an economic engine for the entire region and it's unfortunate this group would spend only 50 hours and then make all these assumptions based on just that."

French said a 1991 airport study proved it benefits the city and the region. The airport generates \$19 million and pays \$1.1 million in local taxes each year, according to a Watsonville Airport Economic Impact Study.

The property is on 370 acres on Airport Road, just off Highway 1. Aviation businesses on the property include Watsonville Aviation, Santa Cruz Flying Club, United Flight Services and Bay Area Taxi, while industrial businesses there include Mid-Valley Supply, Lucent Technologies, Custom Aluminum Windows and Pacific Ag Pak.

That study showed that airport activity includes 40 percent for business, 40 percent for tourism and 20 percent as other uses.

The airport is run through a

city enterprise fund, which means all money earned by the airport must be used for the same purposes. French said the airport does not lose money.

City Council support for the airport has remained strong over the years, with the council last year approving an upgrade including 69 regular hangars and a \$2.8 million project to build six corporate hangars.

French said the work for the 69 regular hangars will begin soon, while the corporate hangars are 95 percent complete and already have tenants. He said a waiting list includes 210 people for regular hangars.

While there has been some community support in the past for converting the airport property to a mixed-use center, there are major drawbacks. First, there is no guarantee that developers would want to move into the site, and, second, the city would have to pay the federal government for the land. The property was given to the city after World War II with the stipulation it remain an airport.

Feldman remains positive that change will come.

"I think the airport projects have been rubber-stamped throughout," Feldman said. "I don't think they will close the think down but we want to at least bring out the truth on some issues."

He would at least like the city to raise fees charged to pilots for hangars. Doing so would bring more money into city coffers.