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City's airport bright spot in fiscal picture

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With a June target for completing what will be a painful 1993-94 budget, there's at least one area of operations expected to provide the city some relief. The Watsonville Airport is in the black and promises to be financially independent for the coming fiscal year.

The good tidings were brought before the City Council last night by Assistant Fire Chief Don French, who in January became airport manager, overseeing the facility's reorganization.

Airport management saw major changes with the facility's former full-time manager, Kim Whirt, being replaced by French, who splits his time between the airport and his role as operations/training chief officer at the Fire Department. Other staff include a full-time operations supervisor, two operators and a secretary.

Energy use has been another cost-cutting target of the reorganization's first quarter. A new lighting system for the airport's rotating beacon will cut power con-

sumption in half and stretch the time for replacing the beacon bulb from six months to five years.

Fuel billing was already changed to a tiered policy based on usage. A 5-cent per gallon discount is given to high-volume customers. Begun just last month, French said its too early to tell how well the plan is working.

Several short-term goals have been established to further reduce labor costs. Overtime pay to holiday fueling staff hours will be reduced when a new 24-hour self-fueling island starts up. The island will also reduce summer staffing from 12 to eight hours a day. It is expected to be completed by the middle of next month.

Tests are currently being conducted on the viability of the airport's clay soil for use as a liner for landfills. The county has expressed interest in buying the excess clay from the airport, and price negotiations are in progress, French said. His quarterly report to the council called the plan "a 'win' for both sides."

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Implementing a good-neighbor policy has been a second priority for the department, with noise abatement at the top of that list.

With a goal of achieving a 25 percent reduction in noise complaints over the next year, a noise-abatement policy will be written and published in airport directories by July 1, 1994. Key provisions include educating all local pilots on proper flight policies and air patterns; installation of a voice-mail noise complaint hot line; having available airport personnel monitor air-traffic patterns; and development of a policy to deal with repeat or blatant offenders.

French also said plans are moving ahead to build new hangars over the next five years to meet existing demand, adding that the average wait for hangar space is 12 years.

In other action, the council:

- Agreed to send telegrams to President Clinton and Governor Wilson requesting permission to lower to half-staff the American and state flags in memory of Cesar Chavez. The flags would remain lowered until his burial Thursday;

- Voted to support legislation by state Sen. Henry Mello to put a bond measure on the June 7 ballot providing \$263 million in funds to buy, restore and protect coastal and natural resources. It is possible that some of the wetlands in and near Watsonville could be purchased with such money.

The bill, SB473, is identical to legislation introduced by Mello in the last legislative session that closed before action was decided on any bond measures;

- Gave final approval to a change in the Watsonville Municipal Code doubling the permit fee and increasing the number of garage sales allowed per year.

The current \$5 fee has not changed since 1972, and the increase is expected to raise an annual \$3,000.

Another annual \$3,000 in revenue is estimated by increasing the number of sales per year from one to four. APR 28 1993