

Fly-In may take wing

Sponsors eye Moffett Field

By KAREN CLARK
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WATSONVILLE — Officials may announce as early as Monday that the popular West Coast Antique Fly-In and Air Show is leaving Watsonville Airport for a roomier home at Moffett Field.

Gayle Womack, executive director of Wings of History, which sponsors the 34-year-old show, would not confirm the move to the field north of San Jose, noting there still are details to be worked out.

"We're looking in that direction," Womack said. "We expect to have an announcement on Monday."

Wings of History, formerly known as the Northern California Antique Airplane Association, has been coveting a larger site for its annual Memorial Weekend show for at least three years.

The three-day event drew more than 20,000 people to Watsonville in 1998, many of them out-of-towners who fueled the local economy by staying at motels and eating out at restaurants.

But Wings of History officials long have dreamed of creating an air

show on par with the annual Oshkosh West, the Wisconsin celebration of flight that attracts 800,000 people and 11,000 airplanes during a seven-day run.

'There's a strong possibility (the show will move), but that's not for sure yet. ... It could still fall apart.'

Gene Cox, chairman, air show and fly-in.

Such a celebration isn't possible as long as Wings of History continues to use the small Watsonville site, which attracts some 600 restored antique, classic, neo-classic, military and home-built airplanes each

year.

Last spring, the group pitched the idea to officials from Sunnyvale and Mountain View, who were figuring out new uses for the recently decommissioned air base located on Highway 101 in Mountain View.

"It all sounds like a good idea ... but this is a huge move," said Gene Cox, chairman of the Watsonville air show and fly-in. "There's a strong possibility (the show will move), but that's not for sure yet. ... It could still fall apart."

Cox said Wings of History members are expected to vote on the proposal Friday during a regularly scheduled meeting of the general

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membership.

Watsonville Airport Manager Don French could not confirm reports that the air show is leaving. But he said city officials already are making contingency plans in case it does.

"We'll continue to have a fly-in," French said. "We'll go back to what we call truly a fly-in, and not an air show."

The event, which might be moved to the Fourth of July weekend, not only would feature a display of antique airplanes, but also old, restored cars and hot rods, French said.

"We think we can do a bunch of nice stuff out here, even if the air show leaves," he said.

Those plans might include a fireworks show, French said, as long as that's acceptable with the groups that now sponsor the city's Fourth of July celebration.

"We're confident that one way or another, we're going to have a fly-in," said Gary Smith, Watsonville's assistant city manager and fire chief. "We had a fly-in before this group; they didn't initiate it."

The original shows were sponsored by the Watsonville Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Northern California Antique Airplane Association. In 1989, the group won city support for sponsoring the show on its own after the other sponsors dropped out.

Both Smith and French said that if Wings of History cuts its ties to Watsonville there will be no hard feelings.

"They're a nonprofit earning money to build a muse-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

A World War II B-24 Liberator at Watsonville Airport at the 1994 Fly-In.

um," Smith said. "They'll have a good opportunity at Moffett Field to do a big show."

In a 1997 Sentinel article, Womack said the Watsonville fly-in and air show has averaged \$50,000 to \$60,000 in annual revenues.

"Every bit of that goes into the museum," she said. "By moving to a place like Moffett, we'd be able to bring in other aviation groups to share in the profits as well as raise more money to support our ongoing museum project."