

Watsonville on a growth spurt

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

Watsonville grew faster during the past four years than any other city in the Monterey Bay area, the executive officer of the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) said Wednesday night.

At a public hearing on the city's "sphere of influence," LAFCO official Pat McCormick pointed out that the average four-year growth rate for the 16 cities in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties was 2 percent, with Watsonville's growth topping them all at 7.2 percent. McCormick said he obtained the statistics from a recently completed report by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG).

Some of the city's increase in population, McCormick said, was caused by annexation, but the biggest reason for the dramatic increase was a spurt in housing construction during the four-year period.

In the coming years, McCormick predicted, "Watsonville will continue to be a growth center."

About 25 people attended the hearing, held at E.A. Hall School. A third of the audience consisted of city officials, and most of the others were other government officials or developers.

LAFCO commissioners next month are expected to decide on the boundaries of Watsonville's "sphere" through 1990. Wednesday night, however, the commissioners simply listened to comments from the audience and asked the city staff questions.

The City Council in early September decided that the sphere should encompass all property that the city will provide services to by 1990. The property, argued Mayor Bill Johnston, "doesn't have to be annexed," but the city "should have some say about it."

As a result, the council - with Councilwoman Betty Murphy dissenting - voted to recommend that LAFCO include in the sphere all the land within the county's "urban services line" adopted by the Board of Supervisors two years ago, in addition to a few other portions of the Pajaro Valley.

The urban services line encompasses virtually the entire urbanized area of the valley. The additional areas that the council wants in the sphere are: land between the present city limits and Corralitos Creek across from the Franich orchards; some agricultural parcels owned by Bill Burgstrom and M&F Farming north of West Beach Street near the freeway; and a small area around the city-owned Pinto Lake park, as well as the park itself.

Mayor Bill Johnston (himself a LAFCO commissioner, but who was not wearing that hat Wednesday night) said city officials realize that Watsonville is a rapidly growing area. But, he said, the growth needs to be fast to accommodate the demand for more housing.

"We have a lot of farmworkers and don't have the houses to put 'em in," said the mayor, noting that it wasn't unusual in Watsonville to have several families living in one house.

Watsonville attorney Tony Franich pointed out to commissioners that "for years and years and years, Watsonville didn't grow at all." Now the city is simply "catching up" with growth that has occurred elsewhere in California, he said.

Franich, whose free-flowing talks are familiar to many Santa Cruz County officials, spoke at length about his plan to have annexed 72 acres of apple orchards off East Lake Avenue.

He showed slides indicating how he thought the land could be developed

in a way that would not disturb neighboring property owners. The answer, he said, was "proper buffering."

A picture may be worth a thousand words, Franich said in an aside, "but my problem is that I have the picture and also a thousand words."

Franich noted that his land was level, meaning it can be developed more inexpensively than rolling land. As a result the housing prices in the area "won't be as great," he said.

LAFCO predicts that by 1992, the population of the Pajaro Valley will be 60,100. By 2002, that figure is expected to increase to 77,400. At present it's about 42,000. Five years ago it was 32,300.

Mike Kostyal, former owner of Books for Everyone on Main Street, contended that the rapid growth through the next 10 years "doesn't look like an orderly expansion."

He said he was worried that the increased growth would lead to more crime. "And Watsonville has a serious crime problem if you listen to the people who run for office," he said.

Kostyal said he'd like to see open space and "greenbelts" maintained in the valley. "I'd hate to see the greenbelt for Watsonville be the Santa Cruz Mountains," with homes filling the valley, he remarked.

Some growth, he said, should be allowed to occur, "but it doesn't have to blow up like a balloon and then pop."

LAFCO Commissioner Gary Patton, the chairman of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, expressed concern about the valley's water overdraft problem (which stems from the fact that more water is being pumped out of the ground than is being replenished). More growth, he said, will only aggravate the problem.

But Chris Kahr, the city's consulting engineer, argued that even if growth in Watsonville came to a grinding halt, "the overdraft problem would not be solved," because the problem is caused by the great amount of water pumped out of the ground by Pajaro Valley farmers.

According to Ms. Kahr, 90 percent of the pumpage in the Pajaro Valley is for irrigation. The city of Watsonville, she said, pumps out only 5 percent of the valley's water.

"Despite what the city of Watsonville does, there will still be an overdraft," Ms. Kahr said, contending that the answer to the problem is replenishing the aquifers through recycling water or bringing it in from another area - or perhaps by building a dam to prevent water from the Pajaro River from flowing out to the Monterey Bay.

Midcounty Supervisor Robley Levy, a LAFCO commissioner, said she hoped the sphere of influence boundary didn't encourage the development of prime farmland. LAFCO, she said, should "see how much land the city needs to meet its growth goals," and then try to direct that growth onto non-agricultural land.

Mayor Bill Johnston had indicated in his presentation before the LAFCO board that the city would discuss the possibility of including Pajaro, Watsonville's "orphan" across the river, within the city's sphere of influence. But a staff member of the Monterey County LAFCO, Joe Hart, said Wednesday night that his agency was worried about such a proposal, since it may encourage development of farmland in north Monterey County.

The LAFCO board will make its decision on the boundaries of the sphere at its Nov. 4 meeting, which begins at 9:30 a.m. in the Board of Supervisors' chambers in the county governmental center in Santa Cruz.

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