

Watsonville urban limits, housing spark discussion

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WATSONVILLE — Developing an urban limit line and building more affordable housing topped the General Plan Steering Committee's discussion Wednesday evening.

The committee, which has been working for two years on a revised General Plan to accommodate growth in the Pajaro Valley to the year 2005, worked on the language for developing an urban limit line and greenbelt, beyond which urban development would not be allowed.

The idea behind the proposal is to preserve as much agricultural land as possible in the Pajaro Valley, while sacrificing some farm land adjacent to the city to meet the anticipated housing needs of the future.

This was the second meeting devoted to the urban limit line, and the committee is still hearing comments from the public.

The General Plan proposes to convert 1,449 acres of agricultural land to residential (653 acres), industrial and commercial (115 acres) and park space (681 acres), with most of the land going to parks.

All of the urban uses would remain within the urban limit line and be surrounded by parks, open space, sloughs and natural boundaries.

The urban limit line will follow natural boundaries, such as the Pajaro River, Corralitos Creek, Salsipuedes Creek and sloughs west of Highway 1.

Parks and open space, wherever possible, will form a greenbelt to provide a distinct visual boundary and an agricultural buffer between urbanization and farming.

The phasing of urban development within the urban expansion area will be directly tied to the city's Capital Improvements Program and public services budget, to ensure new development doesn't outpace the ability of the city to provide services. No leap-frog development will be allowed within the expansion area, the plan states.

Although the goals of the plan were lauded, several people at the meeting suggested the plan needed more "teeth" to enforce the policies.

"What legal teeth is there in these policies?" asked Mike Kostyal, a resident of the Lakeview Drive area just east of the city limits.

Planning Director Bud Carney pointed out that the General Plan is one of the city's strongest legal documents for channeling growth and development into certain areas and away from others.

Kostyal suggested the committee

drop its plans to designate the farmland on East Lake Avenue to the Salsipuedes Creek — including the controversial 72-acre Franich apple orchard — as residential and shift the focus to the Calabasas and Buena Vista roads area.

"This," he said, pointing to the East Lake Avenue land-use changes, "defies the agricultural preservation policy that's been articulated in your General Plan drafts."

So far, the committee doesn't seem willing to keep the East Lake Avenue corridor in agriculture. Much of the area's growth is slated to occur in that area.

Rebecca Garcia, a potential City Council candidate, said she wanted the General Plan to specifically guarantee affordable housing. Currently, the plan speaks of "encouraging" housing for low- and moderate-income residents.

Chairman John Kane said he didn't think the General Plan was the appropriate document to call for an inclusionary ordinance — a quota requiring developers to set aside a certain percentage of units at reduced prices.

"That's an issue for the City Council," he said.