

City officials zero in on saving farm land

By JENNIFER KOSS
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville is grappling with the problem of preserving agricultural land around the city in the face of "leapfrog" development occurring in the county.

The steering committee that has been working to update the city's General Plan talked last night about a proposed greenbelt, meant to protect Watsonville's farm lands. The concept of a greenbelt, or "urban limit line," has often been mentioned by committee members in the

nearly three years they've been working on the General Plan update, "Watsonville: 2005." However, last night was the first time they discussed an actual line for the greenbelt.

As defined by planner Maureen Owens, the urban limit line is the outside limit for any future city expansion.

Owens described the proposed greenbelt as following many of the natural features of the Watsonville area, including the Pajaro River, Corralitos and Salsipuedes creeks and the sloughs west of Highway 1. She

said planners proposed changing the land-use designation on land along the Pajaro River from agricultural to industrial.

Steering Committee Chairman John Kane disagreed, however, with the idea of land from Beach Road to the river being designated anything but agricultural.

"We're talking about farm land and we're talking about prime farm land," he said, adding that either the greenbelt line should be moved to protect that land, or the designation on it changed.

Mayor Betty Murphy, a member of the committee, agreed with Kane, calling the agricultural land near the river "the best in the world." She also questioned the implications of a greenbelt, particularly in relation to development on the county lands surrounding Watsonville, such as around Pinto and Kelly lakes.

"Does an urban line say that if development takes place outside that urban line, the city has the right to refuse service?" Murphy asked.

She asked for a legal explana-

tion at the committee's next meeting, pointing out that development in the county was putting pressure on agricultural lands.

Owens said planners were also concerned about development in the county. Applications have been increasing for land splits in the Pinto Lake and Freedom areas, she said, "and it is contrary to the long-term preservation of agricultural land."

She said she would like to see cities and counties working

together to devise general plans that would be in the best interests of everyone.

Planning Director Carney said Watsonville has no control over what goes on in either Santa Cruz or Monterey counties. Despite including Pajaro within the city's planning line, for example, Watsonville can only suggest to Monterey County what should happen there.

Development on county lands could have the same destruc-

See PLAN page 2 ►

► From page 1

tive effect on Watsonville as growth a few years ago had on the Santa Clara Valley, he said. Watsonville should encourage the counties not to allow urban islands, he said, "because these urban islands, as they grow and develop, will destroy agriculture as we know it now."

He also said, however, that "there is a tremendous need for jobs" in Watsonville. The city has one of the highest unemployment rates in the Monterey Bay and San Francisco Bay areas, he said.

"And we aren't going to get jobs without industrial land," Carney said.

Some Watsonville residents who attended last night's meeting disagreed with Carney, however.

Mike Kostyal said that Lakeview Road residents had signed a petition urging that their neighborhood remain designated as agricultural land. A resident of the Tynan Lake area said he did not want his neighborhood to "end up being like Cutter Drive," lined with homes only the rich could afford.

"Right now, you can drive right along here and see the lake in its virgin state," he said.

Robert Chacanaca said the General Plan update was taking shape too fast. He referred to the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal Monday to hear Watsonville's election-suit case, forcing the city to go to district elections, and the council's subsequent cancelling of the May 9 election until a districting plan is in place.

"I think that this (the General Plan update) should slow down to a crawl until we have a new council," Chacanaca said.

Committee Chairman Kane said he preferred to move forward on the committee's timeline, but added that the potential change of the council would be a topic for future discussion. The timeline calls for adoption of Watsonville: 2005 in August.

"This committee started meeting in 1986," Kane said at one point. "It (Watsonville: 2005) was going to be finished and presented to the council by the end of 1987 and we're still here."