

The General Plan is more than just paperwork

By NANCY BARR
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Eighteen years ago, the city fathers set down a plan for how they wanted Watsonville to look in 1990.

They envisioned residential development all along Harkins Slough Road, up and down Green Valley Road Extension, a high school on Green Valley Road at Amesti Road and the extension of Rodriguez Street to meet Pennsylvania Drive.

That residential land on Harkins Slough is now the site of the Westridge Business Park and the proposed Landmark Business Park; the Green Valley Extension area now includes a couple of churches, an athletic club and many offices; the

high school and road extensions are ideas that have since fallen by the wayside.

So, if such major changes are made in the city's most important planning document — the General Plan — why does the city go through all the bother of drafting and adopting one?

For one reason, state law requires it.

But there's more to it than that.

The General Plan is the "constitution" for the city's growth, city Planning Director Bud Carney said. It lays out the city's goals, not just on land use, but on the related issues of traffic flow, housing, recreation and safety. It lays out those goals in very specific terms.

"The term 'general plan' is a misnomer," Carney said. "It should be 'long-range comprehensive plan for future development.'"

Over the years, general plans have evolved from maps showing more or less where industrial, residential and commercial growth should be permitted, and a few of the other most basic aspects of planning, to a specific plan showing exactly how each lot in the city should be developed, if at all.

A property owner can now look at his or her individual parcel on the General Plan map, and know just how the city would like to see the land used. However, that doesn't mean the city can't change its mind.

In addition to the map, the General Plan includes a comprehensive document that includes city policies on all facets of growth. Policies say anything from "preserve agricultural land" to "keep truck traffic off local streets."

Watsonville is now doing a major overhaul of its General Plan. The last General Plan, adopted in 1969, has been revised so many times since then it hardly resembles the original document. The new plan is meant to project the city's development to the year 2005.

The City Council has hired a consultant to assist with the time-consuming job, and has appointed an eight-member steering committee to

make recommendations on the new plan. The committee — made up of two members each from the City Council and the Planning, Parks and Design Review commissions — meets every other week to go over existing General Plan policies, and to discuss what they'd like to see in the new General Plan.

So far, the group has been going through an education process of sorts, Carney said, so that all the committee members have a full understanding of the task ahead of them. Although all committee meetings are open to the public, attendance has been sparse.

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The committee will soon map out a plan for soliciting public opinion and involvement in the drafting of the new General Plan. Encouraging public participation is required by the state.

Interesting the public in the details of the General Plan may prove to be a challenge, Carney admits.

"One of the tragic aspects of this type of society is people tend not to be involved until there's a crisis or it affects them personally," he said. "It's hard for people to take on issues that don't involve their family."

Some aspects of the plan may prove more interesting to the public than others. The circulation plan, which lays out the suggested traffic patterns, may attract a great deal of attention, because many people have become frustrated with the increased traffic in the city.

The circulation element of the plan is just one of seven sections the state requires be included in the General Plan. The others cover housing, land use, conservation, open space, noise and safety. The state requires, too, that the plan be internally consistent. This means, for instance, that the land-use element must not conflict with the housing or circulation elements.

It also has to include an area greater than the city itself. The entire "sphere of influence" — the area into which the city could expect to expand eventually — as set forth by the Local Agency Formation Commission, must be included in the plan. The General Plan also includes a wider area, if any of that area is somehow interrelated with what happens within the city's jurisdiction.

For instance, Pajaro is included in Watsonville's planning area, even though it is under Monterey County jurisdiction, and the city couldn't hope to annex any part of it. What happens in Pajaro, however, in terms of industrial, commercial, or residential growth, could have a major impact on what happens in Watsonville.

Likewise, Monterey County's General Plan will include part of the city of Watsonville.

"The state wanted to be sure jurisdictions are talking to each other," Carney said, explaining the wide planning areas.

As the new General Plan is drafted, city residents and city officials have the perfect opportunity to think about what

they want for Watsonville's future. It's a time to project the city's growth, and adequately plan for it, Carney said, and to consider "what does Watsonville want to become in the next 20 years? what are the constraints and what are the opportunities?"

Foremost among the constraints is that the city is surrounded by agricultural land.

"It's the city's objective to maintain prime agricultural land," Carney said, "and I expect it will continue to maintain this policy."

That means that if the city is to grow physically as well as in population, the city would have to look for other land to annex to set aside for future residential development, he said. Or, the city could try to accommodate new residents without adding any land — with taller, denser developments, for instance — but that would leave the question of what would happen to the quality of life that people here enjoy.

There is another option — the city could decide how many people are enough, then do what it can to discourage further growth. Many cities stabilize and still do well, Carney said.

While many of the things the city strives to do with its General Plan are considered basic good planning practices, like trying not to put single-family houses next to industry, other things are open to various interpretations.

"There are no clear scientific methods to long range city planning," Carney said. "It's more of an art form."

Carney has made this work of art his department's number one priority and hopes to see it win final approval sometime in the summer.

The process of revision will take the new plan from the steering committee now working on it, to the Planning Commission and, finally, the City Council.

But even the Council's "final approval" isn't really final, because the General Plan can be amended. The city is limited to amending the General Plan no more than four times a year, but there is no limit to how many changes may be made each of those times.

Each time the plan is changed, a public hearing must be conducted, and findings must be adopted to show the amendment is in the public interest.

City residents can expect to hear a lot more about the General Plan over the next few months, as city officials try to get the word out that the public can make a difference in shaping the city's future.