

Airport supporters, activists mix it up

By JAMIE MARKS
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6-14-90

WATSONVILLE — A joint hearing between the Board of Supervisors and Watsonville City Council Wednesday night on a proposed airport commission turned into a noisy free-for-all on the future of the airport itself.

The audience of 100 at the Veterans Hall was evenly divided between factions for and against the airport. At one point, each side took turns shouting down the other's speaker, drowning out any discussion of forming a land-use commission — the issue that was before the governmental bodies.

After about three hours of heated testimony, board Chairwoman Robley Levy suggested a joint county/city airport commission be established, with representation from people with aviation expertise.

The supervisors' board, which is the lead agency on the issue, directed county Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello to meet with the county transportation director and county and city staff members to return in early August with a recommendation.

The meeting began to unravel early when community activist Frank Bardacke insisted on moving the microphone so he could see the people who came to speak against the airport.

Chairwoman Levy repeatedly asked, "Would you please put the microphone back?" But Bardacke refused, resulting in a tussle over the microphone placement between activist Robert Chacanaca and another member of the audience.

Finally, Mayor Todd McFarren suggested Bardacke just get on with his message, no matter where the microphone was placed.

As he has in the past, Bardacke urged the airport be converted to low-income housing.

"The solution to the housing crisis is that airport land," Bardacke said, noting that the Watsonville Housing Task Force has said 2,600 new units of low-income housing are needed to meet the unmet needs.

"We should think of this airport as an aviation theme park," he said.

Several airport opponents carried signs that read, "Why are we subsidizing rich people's toys?" and "Houses not airplanes."

Several Spanish-speaking residents of Watsonville decried their poor living conditions and said the airport is the best answer to their cramped living quarters.

"Why don't you use your airplanes for houses?" asked one irate Latina woman.

Pilots responded by saying there is a misconception that all pilots are playboys with loads of money.

Several said they drive older model cars and have spent less on their aircraft than most people have on their automobiles.

They also stressed the importance of the airport in the earthquake relief efforts, when in the first week-end after the disaster, some 250,000 pounds of supplies were airlifted into the airport.

The majority of pilots favored an independent Airport Land-Use Commission with representatives from the county, city and aviation on it.

"We're not asking anyone to subsidize us," said Tom Harris of the Watsonville Pilots Association. "We're asking that you comply with state law and establish an Airport Land Use Commission."

"It's not an us-vs.-them situation," said another man. "The issue is the land-use commission, which

Airport panel: what it does

WATSONVILLE — There's been some confusion over what an Airport Land Use Commission is. Below are some facts provided by Ray Vidal, a consultant to the state Commission for Airports and Aviation, who met with the public Wednesday afternoon to answer questions.

State law requires every county with an airport to establish an Airport Land Use Commission or designate another government body to guide development around the airport, he said. The only exception is if the airport poses no health and safety problems.

Out of all the counties in the state with airports, only eight do not yet have airport commissions, he said. Six, including Santa Cruz, are in the process of forming commissions.

"The bottom line is they (the county) are going to form a commission or they are going to get sued by the state or some developer for not having one. It's the law," Vidal said.

Once a commission is established, the county becomes eligible for state aviation funds for land-use planning and other issues, Vidal said.

The commission usually is composed of seven members: two from the county, two from the city that runs the airport — in this case Watsonville — two from the airport, and one at-large member.

Other agencies that could assume the duties of the commission are the county Transportation Commission or the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments.

The commission can review developments within a two-mile radius of the airport. In the case of the Watsonville Airport, that means an area that extends from City Hall to Pinto Lake to west of the freeway by two miles.

The Board of Supervisors or Watsonville City Council can override a decision by the Airport Land Use Commission by a two-thirds vote for developments within their jurisdiction.

— By Jamie Marks

we need to address safety issues."

By state law, the county has three options. It must establish an independent land-use commission, or appoint another body to guide development within a two-mile radius of the airport. If no noise or safety factors are found, the board can decide there is no need for a commission.

Transportation Director Linda Wilshusen said 98 percent of the counties with airports in California have an Airport Land-Use Commission. The panel must adopt a land-use plan by June 30, 1991, or face penalties from the state, she said.

Wilshusen recommended that the most equitable solution was an independent commission. City and county cooperation is a key element in forming the commission, she said.