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Farms vs. homes in Watsonville

By Bob Johnson
Special to the Mercury News

The Watsonville City Council faces an old riddle as it returns to the adoption of a general plan for development into the next century: Can farms be saved while homes are built for the workers of the Pajaro Valley?

In its first look at the proposed new general plan, the city council was skeptical about the proposal to absorb nearly 500 acres of agricultural land for development. The map showing new residential tracts, and industrial plants, on farms near the city of Watsonville was based on a policy of looking to expand into areas least expensive to develop.

When the council resumes meeting after the holidays, it will also consider whether it can prevent agricultural Watsonville from becoming a suburban outpost of Silicon Valley.

The regional housing market has already begun to attract Santa Clara County commuters to Watsonville, leaving some

locals to fear the worst of both worlds — the loss of farmland to housing that Pajaro Valley workers cannot afford. It is a fear that can unite Hispanic activists and old-timers who want to preserve their small agricultural town.

"Watsonville is a working man's community, and that's what the community wants — we don't want to be a retirement community or a place to live while you work in Santa Clara County," said Councilwoman Betty Murphy.

"I watch south Santa Clara County plan for extensive industrial and commercial development; I watch north Monterey County slice its housing in half in order to make room for industrial and commercial development; and my fear is that we will be so gallant in supplying homes that we will be inundated by people from other areas."

City Planning Director Maureen Owens said that new homes in recent residential developments near Pennsylvania and Crestview avenues have been divided

roughly equally among buyers from Watsonville, other parts of Santa Cruz County and those from outside the county.

But the regionwide slump in the housing market has left Watsonville with new homes vacant for the want of buyers in the \$200,000 and up range while hundreds of local Hispanics find shelter on living room floors, and hundreds more fear the day next April when federal officials are scheduled to remove their emergency relief trailers.

Inside

Victim still in coma

A San Jose man attacked by baseball bat-wielding thugs remains unconscious.