

Suburbs growing rapidly

That complicates city's planning strategy

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The number of people in Watsonville's surrounding area is much higher than had been assumed — and will grow more than had been expected, a consultant told the Watsonville City Council last night.

That makes planning how to best use the available vacant land in the city even more tricky.

The city is in the process of reviewing its General Plan, deciding what types of development

should go where and at what density. As part of that review, it has hired two consultants to look at different aspects of its boundaries.

The city's "sphere of influence," or the property outside the city limits that the city could annex, includes Watsonville Community Hospital, the airport, the Franich property off East Lake Avenue, and much of Freedom, Planning Director Maureen Owens said.

Consultant Stephanie Strelow said the purpose of a sphere of influence is to create logical city

boundaries, discourage urban sprawl, and provide for the efficient delivery of city services.

The city's "planning area," or the territory outside the city that the city feels has an impact on it, is much larger. That includes the territory in the sphere of influence, as well as Pajaro, the Interlaken District, and more area to the west and south of the city.

The city doesn't have any control over what happens in the planning area — Santa Cruz and Monterey counties control those

areas. But the planning area affects city policy because it has an impact on city services such as parks and water, and on the balance between jobs and housing.

Consultant Nancy Alexander told the council that going by 1990 Census information, the city has a population of 31,099, or about 1,000 more people than the city staff had assumed. Its planning area has a population of 20,582, or 5,663 more people than staff had assumed.

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"That is quite different," she said. "... If you project (the error) over time, you have a substantial difference."

The census figures show that Watsonville had a 2.8 percent growth rate between 1980 and 1990, she said. A comparable figure is not available for the planning area, as it would require a study of census figures block-by-block.

But if the 2.8 percent growth rate were applied to the combined city and planning area, by the year 2005 there would be more than 78,000 people in the immediate area — a "hefty population," Alexander said, and a far cry from the 57,000 figure the city has been using.

Even if the city and its surrounding area experiences only a 1 percent growth rate over the next 15 years, she said, the overall population will be about 60,000.

Alexander said the next step for her will be to examine whether there is enough space for that population, so the city can be in a better position to set a growth rate goal.

Consultant Strelow, meanwhile, will be looking at constraints on various properties in the city's sphere to help it determine in which direction to spread. Constraints she is examining include

agricultural designations, coastal zone restrictions, seismic and flood potential, biotic resources, and availability of municipal services, she said.

Yet another consultant working as a sub-contractor for Alexander, Bob Reese, is trying to determine what the area's jobs-to-housing ratio should be, to help the city decide how much housing and how much commercial land to zone for.

It appears that in 1991 there are 0.91 jobs for every household in Watsonville, Reese said. That's fairly close to a 1-to-1 ratio, he pointed out.

With an estimated 12 percent unemployment rate in Watsonville, however, and a net 30 percent of the population commuting to jobs out of the city, there may be other issues involved in the balancing act. Also, if the Freedom area were included, there would be a dramatic decrease on the jobs side of the equation.

"The ratio is an elusive concept ... There's the counting of beans, and then there's the quality issues," he said.

Arriving at a jobs-to-housing ratio goal is "clearly not a science, it's obviously an art," Mayor Todd McFarren commented.

Housing activist Mike Kostyal urged the council to consider the city's overcrowded housing and its "backlog" of need for housing units, and to lean toward housing

in zoning.

"There are people living in miserable conditions — I hope that will be put into the consideration of this," he said.

Kostyal also asked the council to study the overall "carrying capacity" of the area's resources.

Other public comments included a request by Watsonville Wetlands Watch to study "de-annexing" from its sphere of influence the land north of Harkins Slough Road and west of Highway 1.

The group argued that the area is environmentally sensitive, including not only wetlands, but grasslands that are an important habitat for raptors. Also, because of the environmental and zoning constraints and slopes, the density allowable would be about one house per five acres.

"That's not going to solve your affordable-housing problem," Watsonville Wetlands Watch's Jerry Busch said.

The city would have to extend service lines under the freeway to reach the area, an expensive project considering the limited returns in potential property tax, Busch said. The city could also consider the value to the tourism industry of having a scenic greenbelt along Highway 1.

If it decides to de-annex the area, Busch said, it would make a good bargaining chip with the Local Agency Formation Commission, which governs boundaries.