

Airport battle heats up

Farm bureau stakes out position on land use debate

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WATSONVILLE — The political battle over the best use of the land now occupied by the Watsonville Airport intensified recently as a powerful local agricultural group voiced its opinion.

At its meeting last week, directors of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau unanimously voted to support the airport as a necessary component of the local transportation infrastructure, taking issue with a recently released report by The Watsonville Airport Study Committee, a subcommittee of the Campaign to Save the Pajaro Valley.

That report concluded the airport is used "primarily for recreational and training activities" and that "actual plane activity related to businesses within the City of Watsonville is very low." The report calls for the conversion of the air-

port to a mixed use center for industry, schools, housing, recreation and parks.

"The airport has served the Pajaro Valley well, and is used by agricultural businesses," said board president Michael Theriot. "Like roads, air transportation is very important to commerce. It would be short sighted to think that giving up the airport would solve problems; it would only create new ones."

Theriot also said that farm bureau directors are confident that through careful planning, the city of Watsonville can have an airport, maintain surrounding agricultural land and have space for growth to provide housing and other industries.

"It's important that city and county officials publicly support this valuable asset," he said. "There's a lot more to lose by converting the airport than to be gained.

Just like agricultural land can never be reclaimed successfully after being utilized for building, once that area was built in we'd lose a resource that could never be gotten back again. It's important to all industry in the county."

Theriot said several large companies chose to locate in Santa Cruz County in part because of the availability of air access.

"There's a surprising amount of produce that goes out through the airport, including flowers and berries," he said. "From what I understand, it's fairly common to ship to the East Coast by air."

A member of the committee that concluded the airport should go, Bernard Feldman, said organizers spent 50 hours monitoring flight activity and discovered that an average of 63 percent of all flights are training and practices.

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Members of the study committee believe converting the airport into a mixed use center for industry, schools, housing, recreation and parks could yield an estimated \$10 million in yearly revenue and 3,000 jobs for Watsonville.

Feldman said resistance to con-

verting the airport, regarded by some as "a sacred cow," is largely based on emotion.

Watsonville Airport Manager Don French disputed the committee's results and doesn't believe the study gives a complete overall picture of the airport, in part because he believes 50 hours of study was not nearly enough.

According to French, a 1991 Economic Impact Study for the Watsonville Airport showed that

the airport generated over \$19 million per year for the local economy.

Currently, the airport is home to 301 aircraft, has a staff of four and a half employees and is used extensively by the business community. French states that the four runways accommodate 105,000 operations per year. The Watsonville City Council recently approved plans to construct additional hangars for the airport.