

VCF Watsonville - Growth RP 1/18/92 p. 19

Bursting at the seams

Watsonville looks for growing room

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Watsonville is running out of room.

That is the problem city officials, community members and consultants are trying to solve by putting together a General Plan that will outline where and how Watsonville will grow over the next 15 years.

All the discussion about growth rates, spheres of influence and annexation comes down to this: Watsonville's population grew 2.8 percent a year during the 1980s. Even if growth continues at a slower pace during the 1990s, say 1.8 percent, the city will need between 902 and 1,876 new acres for housing. There are only 55.27 acres of land zoned for housing left.

Even using the remaining commercial and industrial parcels for housing — something that might not be possible, even if it were desirable — would add only 75 acres, scattered in small parcels throughout the city.

Housing isn't the only thing the increased population will need. The city is already short on parks; new residents will need jobs and places to shop, and more land will be needed for businesses.

Maureen Owens, the city's planning director, said she hears frequently from employers who are interested in locating in Watsonville, but need larger parcels than are available. "Watsonville gets looked at a lot," she said. Usually, however, the companies are moving because they've outgrown their current locations or want to consolidate.

The local school district is already bursting at the seams and is looking for sites in and around Watsonville for two elementary schools and a middle school, each needing between 10 and 30 acres, and a high school, which needs about 100 acres.



Kurt Ellison

Concern about wildlife have led to environmental groups to demand that some of the city's undeveloped land be left as open space despite growth pressure. Above, developer Jerry Lohr and environmentalists tour a 900-home project site, home to the rare Santa Cruz tarplant. The project was later abandoned.

tween the Lohr property and Highway 1.

Owens acknowledges that the Buena Vista area is hilly and difficult to develop, and that the Manabe and Burgstrom properties are agricultural lands. But the city has little choice.

The residents of any area the city wants to annex will have to agree, through an election, to become part of the city. That's no small hurdle, either.

"Many people don't want to be in the city limits," Owens said. "The General Plan is a balancing

four stories is a skyscraper. We don't have to jam everybody together. I have a problem with that."

She also said she doesn't want the increased densities and taller buildings all to go in downtown. But, she said, "there are some areas that might be good, but it is limited."

Busch said his group thinks increased densities and building up

have been criticized by low-income housing proponents and minority organizations, who say slow growth increases the cost of land and makes low-cost housing virtually impossible.

Others say a certain amount of market-rate housing has to be built to support privately developed low-cost housing.

But Busch and Organista don't think their goals are antithetical.

'The General Plan is a balancing

Cabrillo College has said it wants to do a major expansion of its Watsonville branch.

Watsonville Community Hospital wants to construct a new building in or near the city and wants a minimum of 30 acres.

"Obviously, we cannot accommodate all of these within the city limits as they exist in 1992," Owens said in an interview last week.

The city needs to grow. But much of the area surrounding Watsonville is prime agricultural

act. We are not going to be able to make everyone happy."

In 1990, a group of housing advocates led by adult school teacher Frank Bardacke called on the city to shut down the airport, which sits on 330 acres, and to use the land for housing. The council voted to keep the airport last year.

Among the groups regularly monitoring and commenting on the General Plan process is the local chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

Celia Organista, the director of

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are good ways to preserve larger pieces of open space.

Owens agrees that increased densities could be a partial solution. The council could, for example, decide to make everyone build to the highest allowable density, or could combine parcels to get more room for additional units. She also says that's limited.

"We're terribly dense," she said. "We can't get much more dense than we are now."

Owens said building up has its down side — elevators are required for buildings higher than two stories and are expensive to build and maintain, adding to the cost of housing. She also said more open space would be required for people living in more intense conditions and parking would be an additional problem.

But Busch said the demand for open space would still be less than what would be required for "urban sprawl."

All in all, Owens said, the city needs to try different types of housing and different ways of arranging it.

"We haven't been terribly creative here," she said.

When land is limited, advocates of low-income housing and environmentalists are often cast as opponents in the discussion of how to use land. In Santa Cruz County, those who support slow growth, usually for environmental reasons,

Busch said Wetlands Watch supports low-income housing and is planning to work with housing advocates to make sure it gets built. Busch said slowing or controlling growth doesn't have to spell trouble for low-income housing. He said the city could set up incentives for people who want to build affordable housing, such as pre-approved permits or financing with local banks.

And, Busch said, the type of affordable housing that accompanies privately developed market-rate housing will help "middle-class people who are on the border to being able to afford housing on their own," not really poor people who need housing the most.

"I don't necessarily see a conflict," Organista said. "I think any conflict can be resolved if people sit down and figure out how to resolve it ... They have legitimate concerns."

Organista said she doesn't think the city needs to plan for much growth. She said she'd prefer an emphasis on providing for the needs of the people who are here now, with just a small amount of additional room.

While no one can really control the growth rate — people just double and triple up in houses when there aren't enough, or are too expensive — Organista said she thinks the economy will slow migration to the area.

'The city was plopped down in the wrong place to be any bigger than it is.'

land. Political officials, farmers and many community members don't want to use it for housing because that would mean losing the community's livelihood.

Other land in and around the city that have not been developed are environmentally significant, like the slough system and its surrounding uplands, which provide important habitat for many species, including some that are rare or endangered. Environmentalists want them preserved.

Still other empty parcels are empty because they are difficult and expensive to develop — they are hilly, are subject to liquefaction, are in a flood zone or aren't near roads and sewer lines. Little can be built around the airport because of noise and safety.

"The city was plopped down in the wrong place to be any bigger than it is," Owens said.

Some places could accommodate the city's growth. Planners are looking at several areas just outside the city limits for possible annexation, by placing them in its "sphere of influence." State law won't allow annexation on lands that aren't contiguous to the city or annexation across county lines, so Pajaro, for example, can't be included.

The city had included the Franich parcel and the Interlaken area in its sphere, but both were dropped: The Franich parcel has been the center of a long, drawn-out political fight, and the Interlaken area is already heavily developed. The sphere now being considered includes the Buena Vista area, roughly bordered by Highway 1 and Larkin Valley and Buena Vista roads, and the Manabe and Burgstrom properties, be-

the anti-poverty agency Adelante, represents LULAC on General Plan issues.

Organista said her organization has pushed for growth in the Buena Vista area for years because it wouldn't take away any agricultural land, a commodity of particular importance to farm workers, who are mostly Latino. LULAC is not happy about the other areas being looked at.

Organista said LULAC doesn't think the other areas are needed. She thinks the city's consultant for the General Plan underestimated the number of homes that could go in there. LULAC calculates that about 300 acres in that area are developable, and about 3,000 housing units could be placed there.

"That's a lot of units," Organista said. Noting that some building has to happen just to address the already overcrowded housing situation, she said, "That will meet the current need, with some extra."

Development would be expensive, she said, but development anywhere will be.

Jerry Busch, a member of Watsonville Wetlands Watch, an environmental group active in the General Plan process, also doesn't support annexing the areas between Harkins Slough and Lee Road, because it wants to restore that portion of Watsonville Slough.

Building up, not out

LULAC and other organizations concerned with affordable housing have suggested the city try increasing densities (allowing more units to be built per acre) within the city and building up rather than out — within moderation.

"We're not talking skyscrapers," Organista said, "and in Watsonville

Remaining parcels are small

Most of the vacant parcels zoned for residential use in the city of Watsonville are less than an acre in size.

There are a total of 254.85 acres of such parcels, but projects are planned for 199.58 of them, leaving 55.27 acres.

The Villages project, Willow Creek Subdivision, Horizon Hills and the Console property, all projects that have been approved or have had plans proposed for them, use up the last of the city's large parcels. The next largest is seven acres, and everything else is between three and less than one acre.

There are 61.34 acres of va-

cant commercial acreage; of that 38.98 have projects pending. That leaves 22.36 acres, with a few exceptions, most is in parcels of less than five acres.

There is slightly more industrial land left. Of the 65.36 vacant acres, there are plans for 11.91 of them, leaving 53.45. Some 13.60 acres are left out of a total of 27.24 owned by Seagate on Nielson Street. A handful more are in three- and two-acre parcels; the majority are less than two.

The city also has some coastal lands, which can be used only for limited purposes. Of 144.75 acres, there are plans for 4.34 of them.