

Big crowd calls for rent curbs

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

It was standing room only at the Watsonville Senior Center for much of last night, where 150 people, several carrying placards in English and Spanish demanding rent control, came to the building on East Fifth Street for a public hearing on the recommendations of the city's housing task force.

About 50 people, the majority of them speaking in favor of two of task force's recommendations, rent control and a 25-percent affordable housing requirement in new development, took turns at the microphone for 3½ hours of comment. Everyone was applauded, but those who testified as to the high cost of housing in Watsonville received thunderous applause, often followed by shouts of "rent control!"

The hearing was a special council meeting, but the council took no action last night. The housing task force recommendations will be on the council agenda at its regular meeting next week, Mayor Todd McFarren said.

A number of people came forward last night to speak about their experiences living in substandard housing with landlords who wouldn't pay for repairs.

One man said that rent on his substandard home began at \$390 a month, and rose three times in a year, to nearly \$800. Another woman, Guadalupe Pena, talked about being forced to move twice by the health department because of the condition of rentals she was living in. She said she was lucky to find a roommate to help pay for expenses in the apartment she lives in now. The two of them had to do extensive work — all on their own — to make the place liveable, she said. She also spoke in favor of rent control.

Raul Cruz, an attorney with Santa Cruz County Legal Aid, said that members of the newly formed Watsonville Housing Action Committee collected hundreds of signatures on a petition supporting rent control in a few hours Sunday.

Cruz said he'd been involved in a number of petition drives, and "generally people are very disillusioned," but just about everyone he encountered while collecting signatures was fed up with the high cost of rent.

Cruz urged the council to pass a rent control ordinance, saying that it was essential to protect poor people.

"They are also the ones that are the backbone of the community," he said, noting that during the frozen-food strike, business dwindled.

Rebecca J. Garcia, president of the local League of United Latin American Citizens chapter said that LULAC supports the recommendations of the task force.

"I can't imagine that any of the recommendations are not beneficial to Watsonville," Garcia said. "LULAC's concern is that you have already made up your minds on some of the recommendations."

She urged the council to thoroughly research the various recommendations to see if it's true,

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as many in the real estate and business community say, that the proposals can't work.

"You won't be able to meet the challenge," she said.

But the working poor and community activists weren't the only ones supporting the recommendations of the task force.

Josh Ezekiel said after seven years of teaching he brings home \$1,900 a month to support his family. In response to remarks earlier in the evening by some in the real estate business who said that help with home financing was part of the solution, said "no one can help me pay a mortgage in Watsonville." He said he'd have about \$200 left over after paying a mortgage, "and that would just about cover insurance." The city needs an affordable-housing inclusionary ordinance, he said.

Robert Chacanaca, a community activist and unsuccessful candidate for council, noting that several of the council members have made their opposition to rent control known, said, "It's easy for city council members to say 'rent control doesn't work.' Six of the seven council members are property owners, they own their own homes. Would any of them be willing to trade their homes and house payments for a rental situation? I'll be glad to trade with them, and when the landlord raises their rent then we would see how fast they change their mind about rent control."

Al Cannizzaro, who heads a homeless shelter in Freedom, said there was a whole group of people who are being left out of the discussion, those who earn a "very, very low income."

"I'm dealing with people who earn from zero to \$8,000 a year," he said. "They don't even come close" to being able to afford rents.

None of the people who spoke against rent control or the inclusionary ordinance denied that Watsonville is facing a housing crisis, or that the cost of housing is high. But some of them challenged the figures the city has used to show that average housing rates are too high.

Judith Bettencourt, who, with her husband owns three rental units in Watsonville, said she thinks rents around town for a two-bedroom unit go from \$480 to \$600. She spoke against rent control, saying that the council "would not think of restricting any other business in town." Bettencourt was also opposed to several other task force recommendations, including the inclusionary ordinance, proposed changes in laws regarding eviction and using security deposits for a development fund.

"You can't expect a handful of people" to solve the housing problems of the city, she said.

Paul Bailey, from the Santa Cruz County Board of Realtors, said that high down payments and mortgages and difficulty getting credit and financing were "the problems of home ownership" that wouldn't be addressed by an inclusionary ordinance. He said there would be problems when people in the affordable units wanted to sell, which would end up being "a costly bureaucratic nightmare" to the city.

Bailey urged the council to "provide carrots instead of sticks" to encourage affordable housing.

each of the housing task force's weekly meetings, it was not included as a final recommendation because the task force considered it too inflammatory and thought it would hold up action on other matters.

Bardacke indicated that the Housing Action Committee would pursue the matter and invited everyone to attend a committee meeting tomorrow at 7 p.m. at the International Senior Center.

Tony Franich, the last speaker of the evening, said that if the council didn't solve the problems of diminishing employment in town, they wouldn't even have to worry about housing, because there will be few left to rent to.

The key to affordable housing is increasing supply, he said.

"I'll give you affordable housing — I've got some land," he said, drawing some laughter. Franich's apple orchard outside Watsonville has been the subject of a decade-long battle over annexation.

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Charles Alexander, general manager for J. Lohr Developers, said the council should consider a lower requirement in inclusionary housing, one that is in line with others in the area. Santa Cruz County, for example, has a 15-percent requirement. He also said that higher income levels should be included in consideration of who qualifies for "affordable housing," otherwise, a "mid-income group is going to be left out."

A representative of the CDM Corporation, which has put up several housing developments in the area, said that rent control would stifle development in the area.

"Banks don't lend to places with rent control," she said. "It will scare away developers, and if it doesn't scare developers off, it'll scare the banks off."

Other speakers suggested floating a bond measure to help pay for some of the expenses.

Community activist Frank Bardacke again broached the subject of converting the airport to housing as a way of getting around the problem of the high cost of land contributing to high housing prices. Although the matter had been discussed at