

A plan for the 21st century

Watsonville Municipal Airport completes master plan

By VICTORIA MANLEY

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — New things are on the horizon for the Watsonville Municipal Airport.

Though it's established itself as an institution that draws a crowd at least once a year for the annual West Coast National Antique Fly-In, welcomes on rare occasion celebrities passing through the Monterey Bay, and is a playground for local pilots, the airport is aiming to become much more than that in the next 10 years.

Airport Manager Don French has been behind the development of the Watsonville Municipal Airport Master Plan, which could convert the airport into a place that houses up to a dozen corporate jets and more than nearly 450 planes.

Though the master plan was supposed to project for the years between 1990 and 2010, it will likely be before the Watsonville City Council for approval by December



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This 1937 Waco biplane, owned by Mike Wittmann of Santa Cruz, is one of the nearly 300 planes tied up at the airport.

of this year, French said at a city council meeting Tuesday.

The plan — a nearly 100-page document that covers everything from flight patterns to on-site industrial development — has been an on-going project for the city since 1989.

Councilwoman Betty Bobeda

said she satisfied to know the plan has been completed — it's been a long time coming, she said, and she is looking forward to seeing the final product.

"It was carefully done and thoughtfully done — they have gone through the whole process," she said. "I'm glad the plan has been completed and updated — I'm looking forward to actually doing it all."

French said the plan would have been completed years ago, had it not been for the discovery of an endangered species, the tarplant, on the airport's premises.

The California Department of Fish and Game has high demands when it comes to the protection of endangered plants, which includes surveying the land to get an accurate count of how many plants exist, French said.

Though the plant is listed as endangered and has been counted by Fish and Game specialists as well

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Fields that surround the runways and taxiways at the Watsonville Municipal Airport are filled with the endangered tarplant, which has held up the completion of the airport's master plan for several years. In the background, a jet emerges from one of the newly built corporate hangars.

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as engineers contracted by the airport, the process has slowed down the approval of the master plan until an environmental report is complete.

"They have been absolute masters at stonewalling us," French said. "In retrospect, we would have certainly presented the master plan years ago, without the tarplant and wetlands (report)."

To date, 28 million tarplants have been counted on the premises, French said.

The master plan projects what the airport's needs will be until 2010, anticipating industrial growth both on the airport grounds and in nearby parcels that are set on the 291-acre site.

Hangars of all sizes, including six corporate hangars, have been constructed in anticipation of the airport's growth. As the third phase of construction is soon to get underway, six more corporate, three mid-size and 60 T-hangars will be built in the near future.

French said the hangars — particularly the corporate hangars — will attract a larger variety of pilots to the airport.

"If we have the hangars built, it will be one more added plus that will attract the businesses to us," he said.

Six corporate hangars were erected late last year, and already have tenants, including Granite Construction Co., Beverly Fabrics, New West Foods and Paul Trucking.

French said there is already a waiting list of 199 pilots for the other hangars, and nearly 300 planes already sit in the airport. That is how, he said, "the airport is totally self-funded."

Eighty-five percent of the aircraft owners are from Santa Cruz County, which has only the Watsonville airport within its boundaries. The remaining 15 percent are primarily

from Santa Clara County, according to airport records.

Development of the airport began in 1939 when the Civil Aeronautics Authority bought the site and built the two runways. The airport became a military field during World War II, and was named the Naval Auxiliary Air Station, Watsonville — it was during that time the United States Navy bought the site and surrounding land, and developed it for industrial use.

French said more industrial uses are anticipated in the future — plans include extending a road across the airport site to Buena Vista Road, more industrial, 40,000-square-foot office buildings and even a motel.

As plans move ahead for the airport, however, so does the opposition. Bernard Feldman, a longtime opponent of the airport who has served on a committee to study the airport's growth, has spoken numerous times before the city council, urging council members to consider closing the airport down.

"It's apparent at this point that the council is not interested in converting the airport," Feldman said. "If we can't convince the council to close the airport... we'd like to motivate the council to think more critically about the airport's master plan."

Feldman's committee is a sub-committee of the Campaign to Protect Farmlands and Wetlands, a group that has committed itself to environmental issues in the area. The city council, however, has repeatedly proclaimed its support for the airport.

"It's an overwhelmingly popular institution," Councilman Todd McFarren said. "If they're fighting a proxy war to shut down the airport, it's a futile effort."

"That airport is something that this community needs," Councilman Al Alcala said, who also commended French for his work as airport manager. "That man has done a marvelous job managing that airport."