

Rezone for high school OK'd

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WATSONVILLE — Citing a groundswell of support for a new high school, the City Council voted unanimously to change the city's land use plan to allow for the construction of a school on a 74-acre parcel west of Highway 1.

"We have to make difficult choices but I think this is the right one," said Councilwoman Judy Doering-Nielsen.

More than 40 people spoke in favor of the new high school. Only a handful spoke against it, citing environmental concerns.

While the council's vote brought cheers from the audience, the proposal appears to be on a collision course with the California Coastal Commission. The coastal commission staff has cited a number of misgivings about the environmental impact of the project and urged the Pajaro Valley Unified School District to look for an alternative site.

The project is located west of Highway 1

Watsonville City Council will next take plan to California Coastal Commission, which has expressed misgivings about the site

and north of Harkins Slough Road.

The coastal commission has the final say on the project since it is located with coastal zone and must conform with the Coastal Act.

The council's vote was made up of four separate actions, which included an endorsement of an environmental impact report on the school project and an amendment to Watsonville's Coastal Land Use Plan to create a new land use for the construction of a public school.

The land is zoned for a variety of uses

including agriculture, single-family homes and light industrial uses. But the area is not zoned for a public school.

The school district prepared an environmental impact report for the project that found that even with major modifications, the school would still have significant impacts on the environment.

The EIR, which was revised after a lawsuit challenged its adequacy, identifies four areas of "significant" environmental impact: biological, aesthetic, cumulative, and growth inducing. Biological impacts

include increased light and glare, increased human activity, roadkill, and increased rates of the introduction of exotic plant and animal introductions to the area.

But the school district, which faces severe overcrowding, argues there is nowhere else to build the school and the benefits of the new school outweigh the environmental impacts.

To offset some of the impacts of the school, the school district has proposed to set aside a 9-acre biological restoration area and a 200-foot agricultural buffer on the north and west sides of the property.

The proposed facility is 213,000 square feet and will cover 50 acres of the 74-acre site. The school, which has been named New Millennium High School, will contain 82 classrooms with a 2,200 student capacity.

The district expects to receive \$40 million in state funding.