



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The Watsonville airport is at the center of disputes over the general plan adopted by the city last year.

Judge may rule on growth next month

Lawsuits center on traffic, water and Watsonville airport

By DONNA JONES

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WATSONVILLE — The future of the city's plans to expand its boundaries to allow construction of hundreds of homes in the Buena Vista Road area could be decided by a judge as early as next month.

Traffic, water and the Watsonville Municipal Airport are at the center of disputes over Watsonville Vista 2030, the general plan adopted by the city in 2006.

After listening to hours of testimony Friday on challenges to the growth plan, Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Paul

Burdick said he would issue a tentative ruling Dec. 6 in the lawsuits filed against the city by the Watsonville Pilots Association, Friends of Buena Vista and the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club.

At times, Burdick, who recently shot down parts of UC Santa Cruz's Long-Range Development Plan for inadequately dealing with traffic, water and housing issues, seemed to be leaning toward one side or the other. But after questioning lawyers on the particular issue under consideration said he'd go back and

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review written materials.

Among the issues:

- Whether the city's environmental impact report should have considered the impact of future growth on Highway 1 traffic.

- Whether more analysis should have been done on water supplies given that the Pajaro Valley basin is in overdraft.

- Whether the city considered reasonable alternatives to its growth plan, such as building fewer homes or locating more growth within the current urban boundary.

The issues were complicated, often technical. City Attorney Alan Smith said the court record runs about 11,000 pages.

Plaintiffs alleged, for example, that the city exceeded its authority when it redesignated an airport runway as low-use to clear the way for building up to 2,200 homes in the Buena Vista area. They argued that the city must follow provisions in a state aviation handbook.

But the city says the provisions are just guidelines.

The state Division of Aeronautics, which also was named as a defendant in the lawsuits, agreed with plaintiffs, however. The agency's lawyer, Raiyn Bain, argued the trade-off for Watson-

ville's exemption to a state law requiring independent airport land-use commissions made adhering to the handbook a mandate.

Burdick found her position reasonable, asking how oversight would be provided otherwise.

"I think the land-use planning has to mean more than a city can do whatever it wants to do," Burdick said.

But lawyers representing the city said independent commissions are only needed when many jurisdictions are involved, and pointed to San Francisco Airport, which is surrounded by many cities, as an example.

Watsonville, on the other hand, is not only situated within city

limits, it's owned by the city, Smith said. There's no reason to think people from the other end of the county could do a better job at making decisions about its operations.

"Watsonville is totally responsible for the airport," he said. "They're doing a very good job."

Burdick said he wouldn't order the county to establish an airport land-use commission, as requested by the plaintiffs.

But he needed more time to answer questions about alleged city violations of state aviation law and the adequacy of the environmental report.

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