

City may have lost \$2.5 million from census undercount

Officials form strategy for the next census

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WATSONVILLE — The city has proven that the numbers certainly can add up. The city of Watsonville may have lost up to the opportunity to receive \$2.5 million of state revenue this past decade for not

having an accurate count of its population in the 1990 census.

Now, city officials are forming a strategy to make sure the same mistake doesn't happen for the new millennium.

Members of the Watsonville City Council agreed to allocate \$10,000 from its Measure E fund to go toward the efforts of forming a steering committee to properly count the city's population for Census 2000.

Martin Carver, senior planner for the Watsonville Community Development Department, said the motivating force behind such an effort to correct the city's population count is the promised funds each city receives from state revenue.

"It's about money, primarily," Carver said. "We're undercounted, and it could be a lot of money over the course of 10 years. It makes sense to us that we get the best

count possible."

Carver said the department estimated that the city lost \$100 per person not counted per year — according to the department's staff report, the U.S. Census estimated a figure more dramatic than that: approximately \$500 per person per year, due to opportunities to receive federal funding.

According to the department's staff report, between 500 to 2,500

Watsonville residents were not accounted for in the 1990 census. Based on the bureau's figures, the city could have missed up to \$250,000 per year, or \$2.5 million in the past decade.

"(The U.S. Census Bureau) is looking at a lot of different factors than just a narrow distribution of state funds," Carver said. "They're looking at a bigger picture."

The city will be forming a count steering committee to facilitate a search to identify secondary dwelling units within city limits, including possible illegal rental spaces where there are poor living conditions. The committee will seek to count all residents in the city, even if they are living in unlisted residences.

Carver said it was important for residents to understand that city officials will not be taking enforcement action against any persons living in unlisted residences. "It's important to get the message early out that this isn't going to be an enforcement action," he said.

To begin, the city will receive for the first time ever the census address list for the city of Watsonville from the U.S. Census Bureau — the source the bureau uses to send out its census surveys — and will spend the summer updating it to include every address possible.

Watsonville Mayor Dennis Osmer said this phase of the project, called "neighborhood canvassing," is the best way every resident can be accounted for, even if the process includes counting people in poor living conditions.

"This is the only chance we have to update the data," Osmer said. "I think essentially, people have to go by how we're doing right now."

Osmer said the most important thing city officials aim to achieve is to give every Watsonville resident an opportunity to receive a census survey, and to persuade everyone who has received a survey to fill it out and send it in.

"The more we promote the public awareness of this the better," he said. "I think the trick is to get people to do what is right."

Public awareness is also the primary goal of Judy McTighe, a partnership specialist from the bureau who has been working with city officials in preparing for

Census 2000. She said the main thing that can be done to improve the census count is to inform residents of the census' importance.

In California alone, there was 3.7-percent discrepancy in the count, which significantly cut back the state's access to federal funding, McTighe said.

"(California) seemed to be one of the most distorted places in the nation," she said. She said it was estimated by the bureau that had the California population been accurately counted, the state would have likely had an additional congressional representative.

Some of the efforts the steering committee will be making include promoting the completion of the census surveys through radio broadcasting, through local businesses, religious and community organizations, schools and Watsonville City Hall.

Achieving an accurate count by traveling door to door will not be the only concern for city officials. Apparently, a new arrangement of census regions has determined the Pajaro River as the boundary between the Seattle and Los Angeles regions.

That means the city is partly divided into two census regions. While Santa Cruz County is located in the Seattle region, San Benito and Monterey counties are included in the Los Angeles region.

Carver said the concern from city officials is due to the fact that Watsonville's major functioning market area is between the city and Salinas and Monterey. In 1990, the Seattle region encompassed the entire region — now that the line has been drawn differently, it makes the possibility of making an accurate count a little more difficult.

"To ensure that we're reaching the market here... it's a (matter) of coordination. We're just hoping that it's not a major factor, that's the bottom line," Carver said. "It's small logistical problems that can lead to headaches — they just make it hard to get the full count."

Osmer sent a letter to Regional

Director Moises M. Carrasco last month requesting that a field office be located in Watsonville. Currently, the closest U.S. Census Bureau offices are expected to be located in Los Gatos and San Jose — no field offices are planned for Santa Cruz County.

The city has not received a response from Carrasco, who was unavailable for comment.

The Seattle region — which covers all of Alaska, Washington, Oregon and Idaho and Northern California — will have 11 field offices have been scheduled for establishment, Area Manager Tom Szabla said. There are four area managers for the region.

"You try to house (the field offices) in cities where you have the major populations," Szabla said. The 500-square-foot offices are primarily establishing to support field staff who go out and participate in neighborhood canvassing, he said.

Szabla confirmed the potential for confusion when a city divided into more than one region. "When you're on the border, it can be rather difficult," he said.

McTighe said the bureau will be working closely with various communities to ensure a more accurate count for Census 2000, and is pleased that city officials are eager to participate. "(The bureau) can't possibly know how to interpret each community," she said.

As bureau representatives and city officials gear up for the final count, McTighe said the best thing residents can do is remain aware of the census, and what it does for the city and its communities.

McTighe described the U.S. Census as a "snapshot of the United States," and Census Day — which will be April 1, 2000 — as the day when the snapshot is taken.

City officials have made it clear their goal will be for everyone within city limits to make sure they make it for picture day.