

Stage is set for new fight over buffer

By NANCY BARR
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For one day last week, it looked like opposing factions of the Watsonville City Council might both get their ways on the process used to revise the city's agricultural-buffer policy.

But now it doesn't, so the stage is set for another argument over the process when the council meets next week.

At the end of March, the council had asked that the Planning Commission discuss the agricultural-buffer policy at its April 6 meeting so that the council could review it on April 28. But when Planning Commissioners Eric Andersson, Tony Campos and Luis De La Cruz missed the last Planning Commission meeting, the remaining four members decided they'd rather study the matter further, and perhaps delay it until the full commission is present.

After a heated political debate last week — which revolved around whether the matter should be heard before or after the May 12 city election — the council majority

asked that the Planning Commission hold a public hearing on the issue before it comes to the City Council. At the same time, Councilwoman Betty Murphy had requested the ag-buffer policy be placed on the agenda of the next City Council meeting, April 28.

To satisfy both demands, Planning Director Bud Carney scheduled a special meeting of the Planning Commission for April 27.

No sooner did Carney put a notice of public hearing in the Register-Pajaronian than four planning commissioners said they couldn't attend the special meeting. Without a quorum — four of the seven members — the meeting couldn't be held.

Carney said commissioners De La Cruz, Campos, Andersson and Charles Reinhart all said they couldn't attend the April 27 meeting.

Campos said today he had rearranged his schedule to attend the meeting, and would tell Carney so, but that he didn't think the commission should act anyway if several members were missing.

"I think it's so important all seven people should be there," Campos said. Campos, like all others interviewed for this story, said he thought there should be some kind of buffer between development and farm land. But he said it will take a lot of give and take to work out the details of the buffer policy.

Planning Commission Chairman Nat Bua said he was angry that the buffer policy would go to the City Council without a recommendation from the commission. He charged there was a "power play" by Mayor Ann Soldo and Councilwoman Murphy to take matters into the council's hands without the commission's involvement.

Murphy denied any such power play, saying she had agreed last month that the commission should review the policy first. She was angry, though, she said, that the commission failed to take any action on the buffer policy at its last meeting.

"I'm irked it takes so long to get something done when it is so important," Murphy said. Murphy said she had been concerned about the ag buffer since it became a point of contention among farmers late last year when plans for a project next to a farm in the Crestview area came to the council. (Planning Commissioner Campos is one of the partners in that residential development, which has since won council approval.)

Mayor Soldo also denied Bua's accusation of a "power play." Murphy had been trying to get the council to revise the

existing agricultural-buffer policy for months, Soldo said, and the materials needed to make such a decision were finally available.

"There are some people on the council who don't want to vote on it before the election and Betty Murphy and I are ready to vote on this before the election," she said, adding that she was referring to candidates on the council and possibly candidates on the Planning Commission as well.

Campos is the only planning commissioner who is now a candidate for City Council; Councilman Rex Clark is running for mayor, and Councilman Vido Deretich is seeking re-election.

Clark said anyone who knew him would know he was not delaying the vote on the agricultural-buffer policy because of the election. He said he just didn't see any reason to rush it, and wanted to be sure all options were fully studied.

Representatives of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau are disappointed at the delay.

"If it would get to the council prior to the election, the present council members are most knowledgeable," said Farm Bureau Manager Jess Brown. If it doesn't go to the council until after the election, the new council members — there will be at least two — will have to be educated on the issue from the beginning, Brown said.

It seems there's been more of an effort to delay consideration of the buffer policy than to complete the review of it, Brown said.