

Watsonville set to take over top spot in county

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Watsonville Group
Move over Santa Cruz.

By 2020 Watsonville will surpass Surf City in population, though Santa Cruz will keep its edge in jobs, according to a regional forecast.

The Association of Monterey Bay Area Government forecast looks at population, housing and job growth in a three-county region. The AMBAG board considered the study Wednesday night.

If the forecast bears out, it may signal the waning of a North County political supremacy that has reigned throughout Santa Cruz County's more than 150-year history.

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While the population of Santa Cruz is predicted to grow 5 percent between 2005 and 2020 and the unincorporated area of the county at 3 percent, Watsonville will surge 31 percent, according to the report drafted by AMBAG staff

See AMBAG on PAGE A9

AMBAG

Continued from Page A1

with the help of planning personnel from individual jurisdictions in Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties.

The potential for redistricting after the 2010 census — to ensure fair population-based voting representation — could tip the county's political balance south.

Santa Cruz City Councilwoman Emily Reilly said she's not worried. Across the county, officials have realized in recent years that "regional cooperation is the wave of the future," she said.

"I know the history of the north vs. the south is pretty entrenched, but I prefer to

think of it as something colorful and interesting that we are getting past," said Reilly. "One on one we can always come up with a solution if we're willing to see the value of cooperation and sometimes compromising instead of just drawing a line in the sand."

Still, in South County, the sense of politicians from the north trying to dictate hasn't disappeared. The issue of relinquishment of the Pajaro River levee maintenance, which the county continues to push despite strong resistance from the Watsonville area, is a prime example.

The growth should give Watsonville more clout to shape its own destiny, Mayor Judy Doering-Nielsen said. But there's a downside.

"My concern is can Watsonville contin-

ue to provide services for citizens of the city with that kind of growth rate," she said. "Property taxes, even sales taxes, don't cover infrastructure, police, fire, libraries and parks and recreation," she said.

"If you become a bedroom community, and don't generate enough jobs ... you become lopsided. ... Our growth is short on jobs and long on housing. That's an issue we're going to have to look at."

Watsonville is projected to add jobs at a slightly faster clip than Santa Cruz between 2005 and 2020, but employment increases are still predicted to lag behind population growth.

Meanwhile, job creation in Santa Cruz is projected to outpace its population increase by a 5-1 ratio during that time period. By 2020, Santa Cruz will have nearly as many

jobs as people, the study forecasts.

As Watsonville updates its general plan, a process it has just started, the city will have to look for ways to improve the job forecast, Doering-Nielsen said.

Todd Muck, the AMBAG analyst in charge of the forecast project, cautioned against only looking at the number of jobs. Employment diversity is important as well in looking at a city's economic balance, he said, and that's not measured in the study. And some warn that in general the forecast is most reliable only over the next five to 10 years, and that the jobs predictions are weakest of all.

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