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City planners juggle real estate

Effort to avoid legal tangles and delays in growth plan

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Watsonville planning commissioners last night engaged in more real-estate juggling in an effort to keep the city on track in adopting its long-debated growth plan.

The commissioners also moved to avert a potential legal challenge to the plan by recommending to the City Council that a controver-

sial parcel of vacant land eyed for mixed-use development be addressed in a separate environmental review.

Watsonville 2005, the city's blueprint for growth into the next decade, identifies a sphere of influence that encompasses unincorporated county areas outside city limits that are targeted for annexation and commercial or resi-

dential development.

The General Plan's companion environmental impact report, which is required by the state, addresses in detail only those areas included within the sphere of influence.

After months of review and debate of a half-dozen different possibilities, the commission voted Oct. 6 to support a new General Plan scenario suggested by Commissioner Stan Nielsen.

Nielsen's alternative would have required changing the General Plan's anticipated growth rate and opened the plan to legal challenge by including land identified in the plan for eventual urban expansion, but outside the sphere of influence.

The question of whether the EIR was adequate to support the new alternative if challenged in court was given to the city attorney's office to decide.

In a letter to the commission dated Oct. 28, city attorney Luis

Hernandez said the final EIR gives the area west of Lee Road inadequate analysis and "simply does not allow the Planning Commission to recommend" inclusion of the land. Hernandez also found that the insufficient environmental review would "render the (final EIR) legally inadequate"

Nielsen's alternative, a compromise of agricultural land and environmentally sensitive areas, would have also cut 160 acres from a parcel south of Corralitos Creek and reduced the city's ability to handle the plan's anticipated growth rate. The prime agricultural land was targeted for development with 1,800 housing units.

Another 500 potential housing units were lost in the proposal's exclusion of some land in the upper portion of the Calabassas area.

Nielsen had recommended that the lost housing be shuttled to the land west of Lee Road.

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On the advice of the city's chief planners, however, and in light of Hernandez's findings, the commission finally voted to support Nielsen's proposal, minus the area west of Lee Road.

The commission also voted to recommend that the City Council adopt the EIR as it now stands, and prepare at a later date a supplemental EIR for the Lee Road area.

The sphere of influence approved last night also keeps intact the General Plan's 1.8 percent growth rate.

As proposed, the plan anticipates 500 residential units in the Buena Vista/Calabassas area; 250 residential units in the Atkinson area south of Corralitos Creek; industrial or commercial development creating 1,750 jobs on the Manabe-Bergstrom property on the west side; and commercial development of the Resetar property, at Highway 1 and Riverside Drive, where another 1,250 jobs could be generated.

Eventual inclusion of the land west of Lee Road and additional expansion south of Corralitos Creek and in the Buena Vista/Calabassas areas would accommodate the remaining required housing.

The Franich property along East Lake Avenue is also included in the approved alternative.

No date has been set by the City Council to consider the Planning Commission's recommendations.