

# Council rejects drainage fee proposal for city

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After accusing Santa Cruz County officials of "mismanagement," Watsonville City Council members last night strongly rejected a proposed county tax that would pay for badly needed flood-prevention projects in the Pajaro Valley.

The council unanimously rejected a proposal, drawn up by both city and county Public Works departments, that would have allowed the Board of Supervisors to levy a \$15 "fee" on all Watsonville-area households to pay for the projects. By rejecting that new tax, the council also rejected a \$2.4 million wish list of projects that, if completed, would solve most of the flooding problems in the Watsonville area over the next 10 years.

The wish list and the proposed fees, composed by city and county Public Works Department staffers looking for a way to solve the flooding problem, itemize the area's most important projects, and then create a system to pay for them.

But the council members said the county already gets enough money for that kind of work through the Pajaro Storm Drainage Maintenance District and other tax sources, but the county is misusing those funds.

"I think this is just an attempt by the county to cover the mistakes of the last few years," Councilman Rex Clark said. He added that the "mismanagement" of district funds is a "disgrace" and that the new proposals were "a scheme by the county to raise funds."

Other council members echoed Clark's repudiation of the county's management of the district.

"The county isn't doing its job," Councilwoman Betty Murphy said. Added Mayor Ann Soldo, "I'm really opposed to every bit of this (proposal) ... You're talking about putting the two fees (from the existing district and a new tax zone) together like a sandwich to pay for something that should have been done in the first place."

Local property taxes each year generate about \$250,000 for the storm drain maintenance district. County officials say that is only enough to do basic maintenance and not major projects like those on the wish list.

The council strongly disagrees.

It directed city staffers to notify the county that Watsonville does not support the formation, within the existing district, of a flood control zone, which would allow the new charge to be levied.

That decision effectively blocks the county from levying the charge because Watsonville is the most prominent entity

within the district. The county can't levy any charges without Watsonville's approval since a majority of the funds would come from inside the city limits.

That also means nothing will be done to prevent flooding until city and county officials can agree on how to pay for the necessary projects.

"I guess that kills it for now," Assistant County Public Works Director John Fantham said this morning.

But the city council also hopes to push the county into finding money to solve the problem. Council members decided they would petition the county to use some of the \$2 million it has in "augmentation funds" to fund the storm-drainage projects needed over the next decade.

They did that despite the prediction of City Manager John Radin that there is little hope any new money will come into the district for the necessary projects without another tax. However, council members disagreed with Radin's assessment after listening to a presentation by members of the Interlaken Improvement Association, a group of College Lake-area homeowners.

That group told the council it has been pushing supervisors for the last three years to solve the flooding problems in that area, which was hit hard by the storms of 1982.

Interlaken property owners association president Ed Beall told the council his group has examined every line item in the budget of the maintenance district and, "We agree with them that most of the things (that district money is spent on) should be done."

Beall said the existing maintenance district needs more money, but a new tax is not the answer.

"They could do the (projects) they need to be doing without a fee," he said. Beall said the county has enough money in its augmentation fund to cover the costs.

Fantham disagreed this morning. He said, "For sure, we need more money to get the work done. It won't happen otherwise."

Another factor in the council's decision was that many members found repugnant the idea of entering into another agreement with the county.

Although City Manager Radin said a written, itemized agreement could be worked out which spells out how and when the new tax money would be spent, several council members suggested the county would find some way to put the money somewhere other than in the Pajaro Valley.

It was also suggested that the city look into the possibility of managing its own storm drainage district.