

Senior meal contract ruled illegal

By GUY LASNIER
and STEVE SHENDER

An agreement between the Pajaro Valley School District and the city to provide hot lunches at the new Watsonville Senior Center fell apart late Wednesday when it was discovered that the law allowing such an agreement ended July 1.

Assistant County Counsel Deborah Hopkins advised the district that it would be operating under "questionable legal authority" to enter into a contract with the city to provide meals for seniors.

"We could still do it," said Assistant Superintendent Bob Peterson said, "but I wouldn't

want to recommend this to the school board."

The County Counsel's office routinely reviews school district contracts. Ms. Hopkins' found that the law under which the school district had thought allowed it to make a deal with the city expired on July 1. The law, part of the Welfare and Institutions code, allowed schools to prepare food for seniors on a contract basis. Written into it, however, was a sunset clause — an automatic ending date.

Peterson and Superintendent Jim Baker said that law books in the district office had not been updated to reflect the change. They both said they thought the

five-page agreement prepared by City Attorney Don Haile was legal until Ms. Hopkins' review.

School trustees were scheduled to meet this afternoon to sign a contract so the food service could begin Monday. The meeting has been canceled.

In a prepared statement, Baker said today that it is "unfortunate that current law will not permit the school district to provide assistance to the city ..."

The issue caused an hour-long debate during the Oct. 20 school board meeting when City Councilwoman Ann Soldo appealed to the board to help the city. The school board approved a six-month plan

on a 4 - 2 vote, with trustee Lynne Thompson abstaining.

Some board members had criticized the city for dragging the school district into a "political dispute" between the Association of Watsonville Area Seniors, the city and Food and Nutrition Services.

Trustee Lupe Casillas, who had been the most adamantly opposed to the joint food operation, said he thought the board had been "buffaloed" into the deal. "It attacks our integrity," he said today.

Trustee Alex Solano, who had argued against the plan, ended up casting the deciding vote after insisting that the school board see

a contract before any meals were served.

"I wanted a contract to avoid any entanglements," he said. Solano said he voted in favor of the proposal to "help the city get over the hump" in providing lunches for seniors, but he also criticized the city, saying the proposal "was thrust upon us."

"I thought it came up a little fast," trustee Lynne Thompson said today. She abstained, she said, because "I wanted to wait two weeks and check it out."

As the school district pulled in its horns today, Watsonville City Manager John Radin left it up to a seniors organization to make other arrangements for noon-time meals

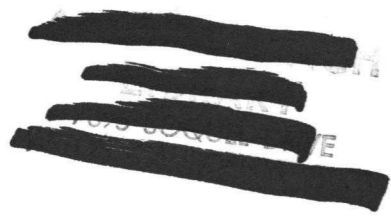
at the new Senior Center. The new center is scheduled to open Saturday, and begin serving meals to seniors next Monday.

After meeting with directors of the Association of Watsonville Area Seniors (AWAS) this morning, Radin announced that, "I turned it over to the seniors. They're talking to a couple of caterers."

Radin said that AWAS (which is leasing the Senior Center facility in the old Mormon Church on East Fifth Street from the city for \$1 a year) would contract with a catering service to provide 125 meals daily at the new center, and that the city would reimburse

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AWAS at the rate of \$2.75 a meal.

The city manager said the city would continue to provide financial support for the Senior Center meals program "for whatever time it's going to take ... until we can get this thing on a self-sustaining basis or apply for our own grants.

"I don't know how long that will be," said Radin, "but the City Council is committed to serving food."

The city's involvement in the Senior Center meals program was occasioned by the collapse last week of negotiations between AWAS and Food and Nutrition Services (FNS).

FNS has been providing meals at the International Senior Center at 127 East Beach St. The two organizations were unable to reach agreement on the terms of a lease under which FNS would move its meals program to the new Senior Center.

After Radin advised AWAS board members that the city would be willing to assume at least initial responsibility for financing the meals program, FNS Director Sam Karp arranged for FNS to pick up the lease at the International Senior Center, where, he said, his group would continue to serve meals and provide other services.

"That's a shame," Karp said this morning when he learned that the school district would not be able to provide meals at the new Senior Center.

"I would hope that the city would be able to find another food vendor," he said. "Having two senior centers (in Watsonville) is really good. To us, feeding twice as many people a day is much better.

"I hope they can get it together," said Karp, who said his organization had been "really quite sincerely elated" to see the city getting "into the business of supplying human services."

Asked if Food and Nutrition Services would still be willing to provide meals at the new senior center should the city's arrangements prove unworkable, Karp said, "That's a hard question at this point.

"It's really up to my board of directors to respond to that," he said.

The FNS director said that the protracted negotiations between his agency, AWAS and the city, which ended in a stand-off last week, had been a "long, hard struggle" and noted that his board had been happy to "see the whole thing resolved."

Karp indicated he was doubtful that the city would be able to secure state funding for its meals program and said he thought the city might find itself "in a bind over the long term."

"Once you start serving meals to people," he explained. "It's hard to stop."