

Watsonville planners push farming 'greenbelt'

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WATSONVILLE — Can prime agricultural land next to Watsonville be preserved if the city and its immediate surrounding environs are to grow to a population of 60,000 people?

The Watsonville Planning Department thinks not and has taken the bold step of saying that prime farm land immediately adjacent to the city should be converted to housing and that a "greenbelt" should be established along the city's boundaries to separate urban development from farming.

The recommendation, which is contained in an eight-

page report to the General Plan Steering Committee, is sure to cause some controversy as it comes up for discussion Wednesday. But Planning Director Bud Carney defends it as the only logical solution to Watsonville's dilemma over growth.

"The question is how do you grow and also preserve agricultural land? The two are incompatible policies if you want the city's boundaries to grow out in a logical order," he said.

"The real issue is to preserve agricultural land and not allow islands of urbanization to occur beyond the city which create a leapfrog-type of development," Carney said.

The staff's recommendation is a major departure from past policy, but it is the kind of nuts-and-bolts planning the General Plan committee has been working on for more than a year as it tries to update the General Plan through 2005.

The committee has been wrestling with how to provide enough housing for the expected population. The city will be out of vacant land by late 1991 if it continues at its present rate of growth. In the latest report, the population projections for the greater Watsonville area have been scaled back to 60,000 people, from a high of 67,000. Even at the lower number, Watsonville will need

hundreds more acres of land to shelter its residents.

Carney said it will take a combination of compromises to arrive at a good plan for the future. The key to logical growth is for the city to annex land that is adjacent to it, Carney said. Otherwise the city will have "islands" of development with prime farm land in between.

"These islands are difficult and costly to serve. It's a real inefficient way to plan," he said. And the effect on the farming is just as adverse, he said, pointing to the experience of the Santa Clara area, which allowed development to eventually drive out the farming.

Going hand-in-hand with the idea of annexing land that's adjacent to the city, the staff has suggested a greenbelt be drawn around the city to serve as a "multiple-use agricultural buffer." The greenbelt would contain recreation facilities, bikeways and other transit systems and provide a transition between urban development and agriculture.

The planning staff has recommended some other major policy changes, including:

- Planning for residential and commercial development west of Highway 1 in the area north of Beach Road;
- Upgrading some existing residential zoning to higher densities and rezoning some industrial land to allow a mix of industrial, commercial and residential;
- Revising the city's planning maps to get a definitive list of available, vacant land. This would mean placing all vacant land in one of three designations: unbuildable, such as the sloughs; developable with special

restrictions, and identify the hazards; or, developable, with only a few constraints.

Carney said it would be undesirable and impractical for the city to eliminate all of its industrial land just because it's not being used now. But he suggested the committee endorse the idea of mixing industrial, commercial and residential uses on land that's vacant.

The cost of putting in the infrastructure — roads, sewers and sidewalks — makes it impractical to convert the land from industrial to residential use, he said. But a mixed use would make the land economically viable and have the added advantage of placing workers near their jobs, thus cutting down on traffic congestion.

While the recommendations came from staff's desire to "look at the issues in a new way," Carney is well aware that the county Board of Supervisors and Local Agency Formation Commission will play a major role in Watsonville's expansion. Both governmental bodies are opposed to letting the city annex prime agricultural land anywhere.

But the staff's recommendations can best be summarized by its own words: "This concept is at once visionary and historically grounded. It requires foresight for the future and tough policy decisions in the present. It has the potential for simplifying day-to-day decisions about development in the central area. It also has the potential for bringing the city into conflict with the county, if it attempts to make the vision a reality. From staff's perspective, it is the best approach, based on the planning principles which are most likely to bring about the objectives of this comprehensive plan for the future of the Watsonville planning area."