



Robin Varni

Murphy Crossing labor camp sits right in the middle of prime agricultural land.

Farmers want labor camp moved

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Farmers and county officials clashed yesterday over a proposal to construct a new farm labor camp at the present site of Murphy Crossing labor camp.

The county Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission finally deemed the issue too hot to handle at its meeting yesterday and opted to delay making a decision until March 10.

In the meantime, landowners in the area will meet with county Housing Authority officials in an attempt to resolve their differences over the project.

Yesterday, those differences were aired — often heatedly — at the commission meeting held in the county Agricultural Extension

building in Watsonville.

Farmers said construction of a new camp is a good idea, but not at the existing site at Riverside Drive and Murphy Crossing Road.

Farmers said any new camp should not be built on agricultural land, and should be closer to town.

Landowner and farmer Miles Reiter said that having a "major housing project stuck in the middle of prime agricultural land has been a constant headache for everyone involved.

"It would be sad to invest energy and money on an already inappropriate situation," Reiter added. "I would be hard-pressed to find a worse spot. It is simply a right idea, clearly in the wrong area."

Reiter's sentiments were

echoed by the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. Local flower grower Steve Siri read a prepared statement from the Farm Bureau saying that it had been a mistake to build the existing Murphy Crossing camp at its present location — "a mistake that should not be repeated."

The Murphy Crossing camp has endured much controversy, including a fire that killed three migrant workers and the swelling of its population during growing seasons.

Landowners present at the meeting all said that such housing is necessary, however.

Mary James, executive director of the county Housing Authority, said the current proposal is not "ideal" but would take advantage of

the fact that a labor camp does currently exist on the site and has since 1956.

"We are not trying to force our way in on anyone," James said. "This is not the best solution, but is the better of two evils. This is not the ideal solution, but the ideal doesn't exist."

Marie Costa, an assistant county counsel, said upgrading the current labor camp would cost too much and that relocating at another site is not an option.

"The reality is that we are dealing with human lives," Costa said. "These people work in the Watsonville community and the housing needs to remain in Watsonville. There is no other relocation placement; there is no place to move it (the camp)."

The Housing Authority has secured a \$750,000 federal grant specifically for the Murphy Crossing site. James said the grant money cannot be used anywhere else and that the county has agreed to buy the 10 acres of camp land from current owner Joe Gerber for \$125,000.

James said the new project would cost \$1.5 million, with the additional \$750,000 coming from loans.

Plans for a new camp call for 37 one-story, three-bedroom dwelling units and 90 parking spaces on 5.6 acres. The current camp consists of 38 units and population estimates at the camp fluctuate from 240 people to 500 in the summer growing season.

James said the new units would house 36 families and that an on-site manager would prevent people who "are not supposed to be there" from staying.

The issue that was actually to be decided yesterday was that of an ag-buffer for the camp. Before the new camp proposal can be approved, the advisory commission first has to determine how wide a buffer will be necessary to surround the project, separating it from adjacent farmland.

But the designation of an ag buffer may imply that the commission supports the proposal for the new camp, and commissioners felt they would be placed in a no-win situation by making such a decision.

REFERENCE

So they decided to postpone a decision until county officials and farmers can meet and try to work something out.

One group whose opinion on the matter is known is the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

"The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously (in approval of seeking the grant) for the present location," Costa said. "And in all my years serving the counsel, it has been rare when they have all been in agreement on an issue."

The advisory commission could decide the ag-buffer issue, but the camp proposal itself will likely be presented to the Planning Department, which will then make a recommendation to the supervisors.

James said she did not want farmers to feel the project would be "forced on them" and said she hopes a plan can be drawn up that will ease area landowners' fears.