



Elected in May, City Council members Dennis Osmer, Tony Campos and Vido Deretich, along with Mayor Betty Murphy (center) found their time taken up with growth and redevelopment issues.

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## City still grappling with growth

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A year of growing pains and pleasures will wind down for the city of Watsonville this week, to be replaced by another year of tough decisions regarding growth and development.

Once again, city government will grapple with the types of decisions that will invite comment from other departments within the city, community groups and the county.

And once again, many important decisions will revolve around growth and development.

The General Plan Steering Committee — comprised of members of the City Council, Planning and Design Review commissions and Parks and Recreation Department — met several times during the year to devise a blueprint for the city's growth up to the year 2005.

The committee predicts a Watsonville planning-area population of 67,000 by the year 2005. The current population is listed at 45,960.

This year, as last, the City Council

and various commissions and departments will make decisions to shape how the city will accommodate new people and new businesses moving to town.

Decisions will concern where to build, what to build, when to build, and whom to build for.

Issues will overlap and decisions will involve other government bodies, as well as community groups.

The construction of housing units is an example.

The roster of residential developments completed, approved or tentatively approved for construction in the past year is impressive: the 152 units of Apple Hill condominiums; 37 units of Evergreen Apartments; 344 units of Madonna Vista; 23 units of Maranatha Meadows; 24 units of Victorian Village; 26 units of the Tuttle Avenue Apartments; 27 units of OMC Townhouses; 20 units of the Orchard Hills development; 24 units of Brewington Terrace; and 30 units of Crestview Condominiums.

Add it all up and you get 707 units of housing that have been approved, tentatively approved or constructed with the blessings of city government.

The construction of new housing in the city has not been a simple matter of building units and selling them to buyers, however. The city has had to consider what land could be used for housing, and who would live in the houses and apartment units.

Illustrating the overlapping nature of such decisions was the November meeting of the Watsonville City Council and Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

The two groups met in Watsonville to discuss issues of concern to both jurisdictions, and the subjects that brought out the greatest differences of opinion were the preservation of agricultural land and the need for affordable housing.

Council members stressed the housing demand in Watsonville and questioned the county's classification of what constitutes "marginal" or "prime" agricultural land.

"There is a lot of land here that is classified as prime, that is nowhere near it," Councilman Vido Deretich said at the time.

Councilman Rex Clark, a veteran of 25 years of Watsonville politics, said he was tired of hearing the City Council being accused of having a "build-at-any-cost philosophy."

Supervisor Gary Patton, author of Measure J, the county's growth-management law, said the voters of the county have given him "marching orders" to preserve agricultural land.

Both sides agreed on the need for affordable housing, but not on how to build it or what lands to secure for it.

Completing the development-land-affordable-housing triangle at the meeting was the presence of 25 members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), which has lobbied for affordable housing, particularly for the large Hispanic population in the area.

So, although designed as an exchange of ideas between the city and county, the meeting helped point out the type of decisions city government will face this year in regard to residential development.

Decisions like: What lands can be used for housing developments? Can agricultural land be annexed for development? Who will take responsibility for the construction of affordable housing?

It is likely the city will face setbacks and progress in residential development, as it did in the past year.

The city had approved a proposal for 465 (approximately) housing units on 52 acres of the Franich property off East Lake Avenue, but after legal wrangling with the county, the annexation was set aside by a court ruling this year.

On the pro-development side, a proposal was brought before the city in December that, if approved, would allow the construction of 86 townhouses near Harkins Slough Road.

Community-housing activists were busy and will be again this year. LULAC was instrumental in forming the Pajaro Valley Housing Task Force, a board created to determine housing needs in the county. Included on the board are council members and supervisors from Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

The Task Force made recommendations for the supervisors and City Council, some of which the council did not take kindly to.

The most controversial recommendation that will be presented to the council early in the coming year is one that calls for an "inclusionary ordinance" requiring at least 25 percent of new housing to be

offered as affordable housing.

Residential development hasn't been the only construction news — there's always the downtown redevelopment.

Progress on the redevelopment of the 200 block of Main Street will continue to be news. The city has gone into, or re-entered into, exclusive negotiations with San Jose developer Barry Swenson, who is vying for the right to develop the 2.26-acre commercial site on Main Street.

Adjacent to the commercial site is the site of the proposed new post office, which would occupy 25,000 square feet and cost \$2.5 million.

The city will continue to engage in negotiations concerning both projects.

Both projects are also indirectly related to the issue of housing.

Housing is being or will be built on the edges of town and commercial developments are being constructed to serve the needs of those communities. Orchard Supply, Favorite Brands, West Marine, Pajaro Hills and Crossroads Center are the names of a few businesses and shopping/commercial centers in operation or proposed.

But there are some who feel that commercial developments on the fringes of town will sap energy from downtown redevelopment.

"I would love to see more of a break in commercial development on the edges of town," said Mayor Betty Murphy recently. "It has always been a mystery to me why we (City Council) spend redevelopment money on the one hand, and zone for commercial development on the other. Rents are cheaper downtown but people are moving their businesses to the fringes of town. But I don't how that can change."

Clearly, how commercial, downtown and residential developments relate to one another, and decisions regarding all three, will constitute a large part of the city's agenda for the coming year — just as it did the past year.

Hanging over city politics all the while is the suit filed against Watsonville's election system by the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF).

MALDEF sued the city in federal court, claiming that the at-large system of electing council members effectively prevented Hispanic candidates from being elected. The suit argued that district elections were needed in the city.

After a trial in federal court in San Jose, Watsonville won the suit, and shortly thereafter, Tony Campos became the first Hispanic elected to the City Council.

However, MALDEF has appealed the judgment, and the appeal is scheduled to be heard in federal court next month. If the city should ultimately lose, the effect on Watsonville politics will be profound, to say the least.