

Affordable-housing plan to be studied

By JENNIFER KOSS
STAFF WRITER

Ideas for providing more housing, protecting farm land and curbing growth were discussed at last night's meeting of Watsonville's General Plan Steering Committee.

The upshot was that a housing proposal by the League of United Latin American Citizens will be studied further by city staff, but a growth-control measure proposed by Councilman Dennis Osmer will have to include solutions to the problems of handling growth to warrant the committee's consideration.

Osmer presented committee members a two-page preamble to a ballot initiative which they said bore striking similarities to guidelines already in the city's General Plan.

However, Osmer said an initiative is needed because it would give more teeth to the General Plan's growth-control guidelines, which he said the City Council hasn't followed as it should. The General Plan committee should consider how much growth will be allowed, as well as where it should be, he said.

"How do you think you can control growth?" Chairman John Kane asked.

Kane said that cutting down on housing won't stop people from moving here, and that the population already here is growing as well; 126 babies were born last month at Watsonville Community Hospital, he said.

"If you can give answers to it (growth)," Kane told Osmer, "we'll discuss it."

Councilman Tony Campos said Watsonville is already 450

to 500 housing units short.

Mayor Betty Murphy pointed to the county's Measure J as an example of a growth-control plan that hasn't worked. County population has grown at a 2.4 percent rate despite a limit set at half that, she said, resulting in people living in higher-density housing.

"There's no constitutional, legal way to prevent someone coming in and doubling up and tripling up," Murphy said.

She blamed Watsonville's 4

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percent growth rate on the relaxation of mortgage-interest rates after several years of soaring figures, which prompted construction of many projects that had been on hold.

If the feasibility of Osmer's suggestion to limit housing was doubted, so was the advisability of building in an area near Watsonville Municipal Airport, as suggested by LULAC.

Planning Director Bud Carney said part of the targeted land is in the aircraft flight path, and that noise levels in the area would be "extremely high." He asked that an additional condition be placed on any potential development, requiring extensive noise studies and project review by the Federal Aeronautics Administration and the airport

manager.

Carney also called attention to a request from Airport Manager Kim Wirht that guidelines governing development near the airport be strengthened in the city's General Plan.

City Manager John Radin said the cost of providing services such as sewer and water to LULAC's proposed area — which is outside the city, with a portion in the city's sphere of influence — might render the cost of development prohibitive.

LULAC President Celia Organista stressed that LULAC realizes obstacles exist to development, but asked that the committee at least consider the area as a possibility. Ideally, 25 percent of the development would be affordable housing, she said.

Tom Am Rhein, of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, said farmers had also discussed that area as a possibility for development because the land is less fertile than in other areas.

"It's ag land, but it isn't ag land like the river bottom," he said.

Farmers have not yet been able to agree on a growth policy, Am Rhein said, but they're increasingly concerned over the imminent closure of the Murphy Crossing labor camp, which will force the relocation of 300 to 500 people.

"That's just one group of people that needs housing now," he said, "and there's nothing. You've got to do something about housing."

The committee asked city staff to study the LULAC proposal and come up with some cost estimates for the May 4 meeting.