

City needs 1,500 homes to end crisis

By STEVE SHENDER

Watsonville's population growth rate has slowed by half, but the city is still facing a housing shortage which will likely get even worse unless steps are taken now to plan for residential growth. That was the word Tuesday night from city Planning Director Robert Ellenwood to the city Planning Commission.

Ellenwood told planning commissioners that population growth in Watsonville had slowed from 5 percent to 2.5 percent annually in the last two years. But, Ellenwood said, overcrowded housing in Watsonville was on the increase in that same period, as people moved into town faster than housing could be built to accommodate them.

Currently, Ellenwood estimated, the city needs 1,500 more housing units to relieve residential overcrowding. And, between now and 1990, he indicated, Watsonville will need another 2,285 units to keep pace with its population growth.

Furthermore, said Ellenwood, the city's existing stock of residential land will likely be used up in "nine or 10 years."

"The bottom line," the planning director told the Planning Commission, "is that residential land is already at a premium and we must start immediately to plan for the future of our city."

Ellenwood, who called for a full-scale discussion of city housing options at the Planning Commission's next regular meeting in August, suggested a number of steps that might be taken to increase Watsonville's housing stock. Chief among them were proposals to:

- Convert "excess" commercial districts to residential use.

- Consider an ordinance which would allow mobile home subdivisions in town.

- Consider "new zoning techniques to encourage increased rental development."

- Increase density in "appropriate vacant residential districts throughout the city."

The planning director also said the city needed to "develop an annexation plan for future residential growth." Pointing to a large map of Watsonville bounded by a thick, red sphere-of-influence line, Ellenwood said, "One of these days we're going to have to break that red line and go outside of (it), and we're going to have to talk about that."

For the present, Ellenwood said, the city should concentrate on promoting the development of more "family apartment" units. Single-family developments, he said, are a thing of the past for Watsonville. "The city can't afford the luxury of large-lot subdivisions anymore," he said. "We're not looking at 'big' anymore; we're looking at 'small,' and that means smaller units."

The Green Valley area, Ellenwood indicated, is likely to become a prime area for "family apartments." One such project, he said, was already on the drawing boards, slated for a site which originally was to be developed for 96 single-family housing units — before the developer went bankrupt. The project, known as Green Valley Highlands, will instead comprise about 192 apartment units, Ellenwood said. He said that a Southern California bank which took over the property will develop the apartments.

Planning Commissioner Erle Byer said Tuesday night that he would like to see the city do more to promote the rehabilitation of its downtown neighborhoods. "Now," he said, "the area is being loaded up with our favorite minority — with 10-15 people to a house and no parking." If the city does not do something to change current downtown housing trends, Byer warned, "we're going to have a bunch of slums."

In another matter Tuesday evening, the Planning Commission approved a General Plan amendment and zoning change to permit the construction of a new state employment office at 567 Arthur Road.