

Annexation for Watsonville development wins OK

BY PAULINE ZENNER

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After 13 years of costly environmental, political and legal battles in his attempt to annex his family's 72 acres of farmland for development, Watsonville landowner Tony Franich has received the go-ahead.

The highly controversial Watsonville land annexation was approved Wednesday by the Local Agency Formation Commission in a 3-2 vote that brought a sigh of relief to Franich, and cries of disbelief to those who fought the loss of prime agriculture land.

The 82-year-old attorney, who will donate nine acres of his East Lake Avenue property to the city for 180 to 270 units of affordable housing and five acres toward a 16-acre park, was ecstatic to hear the news.

"It's certainly a relief after 13 years," Franich said. "Now I can do other things that I want to do. Maybe I'll take a trip. I've had to

stick around for 13 years because I never knew when a new hearing would come up."

The city will purchase 10 acres of the land, now a berry farm, for an elementary school. The remainder of the land will be developed for 394 to 577 market-rate housing units, said Franich.

Pat McCormick, executive director for LAFCO, said the commission's decision is based upon the perception that Watsonville has a housing crisis and that annexing the Franich property is one element of the solution.

"Given the very strong emotional feelings toward this issue, the 50 or so people who showed up for the decision were very civil," McCormick said.

Environmentalists, farmers and housing advocates joined together early this year to fight the annexation, saying that the loss of agriculture land and related farm jobs was too high a price for the amount of affordable

housing units to be built on the land.

"We are very disappointed by the decision of three members of the LAFCO board," said Celia Organista, housing chairwoman for the League of United Latin American Citizens. "We feel strongly that they didn't follow state mandate as to their responsibility as LAFCO commissioners, which is the preservation of ag land. We're not done fighting."

LAFCO and the Watsonville City Council must pass a series of resolutions of approval before Franich can submit applications to develop his land, said McCormick.

Ray Belgard, Santa Cruz County supervisor, Michael Routh, Capitola City Council member, and Scotts Valley City Council member Gina Koshland voted for the annexation. Supervisor Gary Patton and Robert Garcia, public representative for LAFCO, voted against.