

Watsonville annexation vote set

By TRINA KLEIST
Sentinel staff writer

Watsonville annexation

WATSONVILLE — Marie Chrisman has lived in a Watsonville retirement community for about two decades, and is among scores of neighbors fighting an annexation that will be considered by LAFCO board members in a public hearing in Santa Cruz on Wednesday.

The annexation would pave the way for building forty to sixty homes on 14.4 acres of farmland between Salsipuedes Creek and the Bay Village-Pajaro Village area east of Hushbeck Avenue. It is the same parcel that was proposed for annexation in 1997, and which Local Agency Formation Commission board members turned down in 5-2 vote.

Commissioners are expected to vote on the annexation after the hearing. Developer and co-owner William Burgstrom said he was not optimistic about the annexation's chances, despite more than 20 years of planning.

The biggest difference between the current proposal and its ill-fated predecessor is that developer Village Associates has promised the housing would be devoted exclusively to senior citizens, like its neighboring communities.

Chrisman is not persuaded by that promise, nor by the professed willingness of city officials to carry it out.

"I don't trust the City Council and my people don't trust the council," said Chrisman, who lives in Pajaro Village a few feet from the proposed development.

Burgstrom said the property has been in the city's sphere of influence for 16 years.

"The property we have was scheduled to be the third phase of the Pajaro Village retirement area," Burgstrom said. In the 1970s, builders left five streets abutting the property and built a storm drain across the lot in the expectation that the land would eventually sprout houses.

Joyce Wagoner, president of the Bay Village Home Owners Association, said the area is a flood zone.

"Our No. 1 concern is with flooding," Wagoner said. "Every year since 1995 we've been under flood watch and flood warnings."

City officials have promised to build an earthen berm along the edge of the existing housing to contain flood waters. But if the new development goes through, that berm would not be constructed.

"It's a very stupid place to try to put homes," Chrisman said.

Both women said they fear the additional traffic the new development would bring into their area, and the potential disruption of low-income residents who would occupy at least 25 percent of the homes.

Residents have already spoken in public hearings against plans to build an additional 475 homes on the nearby Franich property, where Ann Soldo Elementary School is being erected.

"If you open up these streets to open up more houses, we'll be just another thoroughfare," Chrisman said. "It's just going to ruin what has been a wonderfully quiet adult village."

8/31/99

Opponents also cite the agricultural use as a reason to leave the land alone. The soil on the property varies from good to poor, according to a 1983 city Planning Department report. Nevertheless, the county classified the land as prime agricultural land in 1984. Farmers say the area's mild climate counts more than soil quality for producing high-income crops like cauliflower and lettuce.

Burgstrom, who owns the property with Glenn Kramer and two other partners, is skeptical about the productive capacity of the land, which is hemmed in by houses on two sides.

"We have no agricultural water, no well," Burgstrom said. Only about ten acres are being farmed now. "About half the land is now barren. County drainage control people work on the (adjacent) levy. If they get chunks of concrete or excess dirt, they store it there on the barren ground."

It is the issue of agricultural land, not the concerns of nearby residents, that pushed LAFCO chief executive officer Patrick McCormick to recommend the commissioners turn down the annexation proposal.

The commission has a clear policy of not allowing the annexation of prime farmland unless no other land within city limits is available for the intended use, McCormick said. The city still has about 45 empty acres, although most of it is in small lots.

LAFCO will hold a public hearing on the issue beginning at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday in the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors chambers on Ocean Street, Santa Cruz.