

Planners OK report on annexation of Tai parcel

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WATSONVILLE — The proposed annexation of 600 acres of farmland and sloughs is one step closer to reality.

In a 6-1 vote, the City Planning Commission approved the Environmental Impact Report for the proposed annexation Monday night. In a separate resolution, the commission voted 4-3 to add the tract west of Highway 1 to the city's urban limit line in the city's General Plan, and to remove a tract of prime farmland south of Corralitos Creek from the city's general plan as a proposed housing site.

The 600-acre tract, known as the Tai Property, begins at the corner of Lee and Harkins Slough roads. The owner has proposed building a 1,800-unit subdivision there, at least half of which would be affordable housing.

The Pajaro Valley Unified School District has tentative plans to build a new high school across Lee Road, adjacent to the area.

"It's never really been a successful piece of farming ground," said Commissioner Stan Nielsen, who has watched the property undergo numerous changes since it was the site of a dairy farm in the 1950s. Since that time, he said, it was purchased by John DuPont, who ran livestock on the hilly terrain; by Charlie Buchwald, who tried his hand at an unsuccessful attempt to irrigate the land with treated city wastewater; and by various others, who planted a marginally successful apple orchard and a crop of strawberries that "didn't work very well."

Currently, the land is the site of a \$1.4 million organic specialty lettuce crop, according to an estimate in the EIR. The farmer, Vince Matulich, has said that the land is prone to erosion and that with pending increases in water rates and land costs, it will be difficult to make a profit.

"I think it's worth a try, to see if the area can't be improved," said Nielsen. "The sloughs are in really bad shape from all the erosion running down into them. Those areas are really in need of a management plan."

The developer has proposed a housing plan that would include restoration of grasslands and would incorporate buffer areas around the sloughs. Opponents of the plan, however, say the buffers are inadequate and that wildlife would be destroyed by encroaching development.

Commissioner Pedro Castillo was the sole opponent of the EIR approval. "I'm very concerned this supplemental EIR has been paid for by the developer," said Castillo.

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"We should have had a much more independent analysis. I'm not saying it's illegal or immoral; I just think there's something wrong with this."

Castillo and other commissioners were surprised to learn that it is routine for developers to pay for environmental studies of the land they propose to develop. Representatives of Jones & Stokes, the company that prepared the EIR, reassured Castillo that they take their orders from city staff, not from the developer. Castillo was uncon-

vinced.

"I think that sometimes gets in the way of making an objective effort," he said. "I think it's problematic."

Castillo also expressed his concern about losing agricultural land in the coastal zone, and about developing next to the wildlife-rich wetlands area.

"Once you have the high school and housing development there, we're going to see Taco Bells and Burger Kings. ... I'm very concerned about the lands on that side of the highway, and I'm concerned

about the destruction of the sloughs and the wildlife and the agricultural land."

Organic farmer Sam Earnshaw, a consistent opponent of the annexation, sat quietly in the audience during the proceedings.

"We are very concerned at the piece-by-piece urban sprawl onto agricultural lands," Earnshaw commented after the meeting. "There is no evidence that taking all this land is going to solve all the city's problems."

The City Council is expected to vote on the EIR and the general plan amendment Dec. 10.