

General Plan debate centers on land west of Lee Road

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Another round of public testimony on the city's blueprint for growth opened before the Planning Commission last night with the land west of Lee Road emerging as the focus of the debate. Few of the comments presented were new to anyone who has followed the history of Watsonville 2005, the city's General Plan, the

draft of which was completed last year. The plan outlines how the city must expand into the year 2005 to accommodate a projected 1.8 percent population increase. It identifies possible areas into which Watsonville's boundaries will widen through annexation, including the Franich family property off East Lake Avenue. Spheres of influence, land outside city limits Wat-

sonville would like to annex for future development, are also discussed. Providing adequate jobs, affordable housing, open space, land for education and youth-related facilities while preserving prime agricultural land and natural resources are the plan's stated objectives. An environmental impact report accompanies the plan, analyzing

how development would affect particular areas' air, noise levels, traffic and natural habitats. After reviewing both documents and taking public comment, the Planning Commission will make its recommendations to the City Council. The city is under pressure from the state and county to adopt the long-overdue growth plan. The Local Agency Formation Commis-

sion, the county agency which will decide on the annexation of Franich's 72 acres of prime agricultural land, wants to see a final land-use plan to put the annexation into context. Last month, LAFCO put off its scheduled vote on the annexation, extending it until the end of the year. The city has said it would try, but couldn't guarantee, to meet that deadline.

Watsonville is also "on borrowed time" from the state in adopting its General Plan, the Planning Department reported earlier this summer. The state Office of Planning and Research granted the city a grace period in the wake of the 1989 earthquake and the change to district elections, but that period expired early last year. The city now "runs a legal risk the See PLAN page 3 ▶

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longer the planning process goes," the report said.

The Planning Commission will focus on two sites for potential residential development within the city sphere of influence: the Buena Vista/Calabasas area, and the area west of Lee Road. Both have been the focus of heated debate, and the controversy continued last night.

Residents of the Buena Vista/Calabasas area showed up last night to oppose development there. Some of the residents complained that, despite numerous community workshops and two earlier rounds of public hearings, they just learned last month that their property was under consideration.

The area's natural beauty was touted by several residents as a reason to preserve the open space. But the biggest argument against annexing there was the high cost.

The land is extremely hilly and farther from the city than the other development alternatives. Thus, it would cost more to develop and connect to city services.

In addition, the property is divided into nearly two dozen small parcels, and residents said they would fight a city assessment to fund the development.

On the other side of Watsonville and the expansion debate is the Lee Road property. The land is level, closer to the city and is three-quarters owned by Tai and Associates Inc., which is eager to develop the 500 acres.

Some housing advocates, saying that for affordable units to be possible the land must be donated, are backing the development.

Consultants for the developer and Hernan Martinez, of the Community Housing Improvement Sys-

tems and Planning Association Inc., told planners they supported expansion into the Lee Road land. Martinez said Tai and CHISPA, which builds low-income housing, had a signed agreement supporting a combined development that would provide affordable housing, parks and a golf course.

"We've gotten an extraordinary percentage of units to be applied for low-income, rentals and seniors," Martinez said of Tai's proposed development. Martinez said Tai had given a commitment of 50 percent low-income units.

But the Lee Road development spurred a third, environmental aspect to the debate. Lying inside the land is slough habitat, raising the question of whether degradation of the area by development could be mitigated.

Representatives of the Sierra Club and Watsonville Wetlands Watch told the commission there were doubts as to whether the current EIR was adequate to address the potential impacts of Lee Road development and suggested a supplemental environmental review might be required to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act.

The Wetlands Watch, together with the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau and other city housing advocates, say the city should meet its jobs and housing goals not by annexing slough and prime agricultural lands, but by increasing densities within Watsonville and in the Freedom and Buena Vista areas, converting under-utilized properties to residential and commercial uses, and adopting more effective policies and programs to encourage development of low-income housing.

The public hearing will continue at a special General Plan meeting scheduled Oct. 6 at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers at City Hall, 250 Main St.