

# Unlikely groups ally against Franich annexation

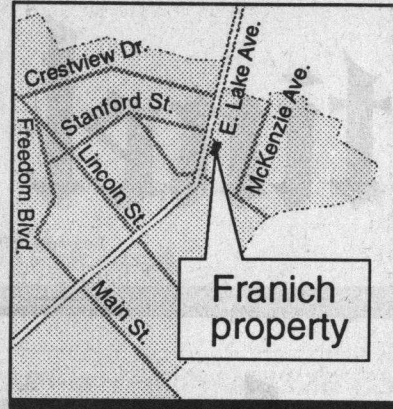
By GREG BEEBE  
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Three special-interest groups who don't always see eye to eye have joined forces to oppose development of the Franich property just outside city limits.

An unlikely trio — the county Farm Bureau, Watsonville Wetlands Watch and the League of United Latin American Citizens — Wednesday announced an "unprecedented and historic" alliance against the annexation of 72 acres of prime farmland by the city of Watsonville.

The announcement comes on the eve of tonight's Local Agency Formation Commission public hearing on the annexation proposal.

While the three groups come from different political backgrounds — Wetlands Watch and LULAC are liberal-leaning, while the Farm Bureau is generally more



Sentinel map

conservative — they agree the Pajaro Valley community must preserve its prime farmland, and look anew at its expansion options.

The allies favor city growth to the east — in the hilly Buena Vista/Calabasas area, rather than the west on prime agricultural land

such as the Franich property.

City officials, after striking a deal with Tony Franich, envision the parcel on East Lake Avenue as the future site for a park, school, and affordable and market-rate housing. Affordable housing advocates, including LULAC, say the nine acres of low-cost housing in the Franich plan is too scant to warrant taking farm land out of production.

A decision by LAFCO could come as soon as this evening.

Each organization opposes the Franich annexation and the city's future growth plans for different reasons, said Kirk Schmidt, president of the Farm Bureau.

The Farm Bureau is dedicated to protecting agricultural land, the essence of the county's \$244 million farming industry. Wetlands Watch has an eye toward preservation of environmentally sensitive slough areas, and reasons if farm land goes, wetlands may not be far be-

hind. LULAC realizes that without farm land and plentiful affordable housing, many of its Latino constituency will have no place to work — or live.

"We have overlooked our differences and focused on the issue that overlaps each group, which is the future growth of Watsonville," said Pedro Castillo, LULAC vice president.

The three groups, with a total of 1,125 individual and family members, have "more to lose than gain" in the city's growth proposal, said Christine Johnson-Lyons, spokeswoman for Wetlands Watch.

"We support the preservation of prime agricultural land," said Castillo. "And if there is going to be development (on farm land), it has to be 100 percent affordable for the people who live and work in this community. Developing agricultural lands would not benefit the families who live here. Taking land out of production is denying jobs for

the community."

Castillo warned that building on the Franich property — or any other piece of prime farm land — could hasten a "domino effect. This would be the first domino. What goes next? ...

"Clearly, we need (affordable) housing. But we all agree that this is not the place to go," Castillo said.

By taking a stand against the Franich annexation, LULAC finds itself at odds with one of its usual allies, the Salinas-based Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association, or CHISPA.

As the developer of more than 500 housing units for mostly low-income farm workers since 1979, CHISPA is going to "strongly support annexation even though we understand there are some concerns especially in the loss of agricultural lands," said the agency's

director, Hernan Martinez.

"We do understand that this is farmland, and we usually never support building on farm land," Martinez said. "But we are willing to do this for the tradeoff. The situation is so desperate."

CHISPA is interested in developing affordable housing on the Franich property if the annexation is approved, but has no agreement with the city.

Schmidt said there is a "high likelihood" the three groups fighting the annexation would work together on other issues, although the trio has "not pledged to forever unite."

"I think we have a lot in common," said Castillo.

*The LAFCO public hearing on Watsonville's proposed annexation of the Franich property begins at 7 tonight in the Alianza School gymnasium, 440 Arthur Road, Watsonville.*