

Annexation try moves forward

Watsonville - Annexation
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WATSONVILLE — The city is one step closer to having its proposal to annex 94 acres of agricultural land along Riverside Drive formally considered by LAFCO.

The annexation was put on hold earlier this year by members of the Local Agency Formation Commission who wanted to make sure that all other options for industrial-development sites had been explored by the city.

LAFCO agreed to place the 94 acres — out of the 219 acres sought by the city — into Watsonville's so-called sphere of influence. But before an official annexation request would be considered, the LAFCO board required the city to study whether the nearby Landmark property could be used for industrial development.

That study, presented to the council on Tuesday, revealed that industrial development was not financially feasible because of high site-preparation and infrastructure costs. The property could be used, however, for single-family homes.

That's a bit of good news/bad news for the city.

Officials are pleased their case to LAFCO for annexing the 94 acres near Riverside Drive and Highway 1 may be strengthened.

"It gives us more insight as to the difficulty of simply going and saying there's an alternative to Riverside Drive," said Charles Eadie, assistant director of the city's Community Development Department.

But some council members had hoped the Landmark site would be good for job-producing industrial development rather than

housing for middle-income people.

Officials believe that diversifying the city's industrial and retail base is the key to residents finding good jobs. The consultant who did the Landmark property study pointed out, however, that industry is attracted by a good employee base, and a city has that when it provides adequate housing.

"Whether you should buy the horse or you buy the cart first, I think this is a very good example of that," said Councilman Al Alcalá. "We do need good housing."

But Councilman Todd McFarren said he believed the best interests of the city would be served by finding more industrial land, and he didn't want to rule out rezoning the Landmark property despite the high costs associated with developing industry there.

"The best way to turn a buck is to build single-family residences, that's probably true," said McFarren. "But I have doubts it's in the best interests of the city."

The other two conditions LAFCO tied to the Riverside Drive annexation also are close to being met.

Officials said the Pajaro Valley Futures Report — which studied vacant parcels around the area for possible industrial in-fill development — should be completed this month.

The third requirement was that city officials meet with Coastal Commission staff, the county and LAFCO officials to iron out how these kinds of annexation proposals will be handled in the future. Those meetings are under way.

The council asked staff to forward of copy of the Landmark property study to LAFCO's board of directors for review.