

Family farm at heart of Watsonville expansion bid

By **DONNA JONES**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Watsonville Annexation 10-18-05
WATSONVILLE — Halfway through this past century, work crews building a freeway through Santa Cruz County plowed through the Manabe family farm near West Beach Street.

Highway 1 ripped about 25 acres from the heart of the farm, splitting the property in two.

'The idea that not annexing the Manabe property is going to save farmland is so much hooley.'

LOU JEMISON, MANABE FAMILY SPOKESMAN

But a city plan to annex the land, as well as an adjacent parcel, for development of a business park is meeting with resistance from critics concerned about the loss of farmland.

The Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission, the regional body that decides where cities can grow, will hold a hearing on the annexation Wednesday.

"The idea that not annexing the Manabe property is going to save farmland is so much hooley," Jemison said. "It's too late."

City officials have targeted the property, tucked between the industrial zone along West Beach Street and new housing developments along Ohlone Parkway, south of the Overlook Shopping Center, for economic development.

Annex

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During the next 20 years, they hope to create as many as 2,000 jobs as new ventures move in or existing businesses expand.

Jobs are urgently needed because of the city's high unemployment rate, typically at least twice the county average, city leaders say.

This is the city's third try to annex the property. After being turned down by LAFCO in 1999, officials hammered out a compromise on future growth with environmental and farming groups that seemed to increase the city's chances this time. But new issues have cropped up, including fear that the city will allow big-box retailers to build on the site.

City officials deny the land will be used for retail development.

And, despite the compromise that keeps city growth away from some of the county's most valuable farmland, some continue to worry about the nibbling away of Santa Cruz County's agricultural lands.

Across the state farmland is being lost to development, said county Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, who serves on LAFCO.

"What are we planning to do, import all our food?" she asked. "Agricultural land is an extremely precious resource."

Jemison, whose wife is a Manabe, said the property has been steadily losing its agricultural value over the years.

Drainage problems, due in part to urban runoff from surrounding industrial and residential development, keeps the property too damp to farm for much of the year. Even



Kate Falconer/Sentinel

Lou Jemison, in front of family-owned farmland that he says is less productive than it was even 10 years ago, supports plans for the city of Watsonville to buy the property for industrial development.

Manabe-Burgstrom

WHAT: Watsonville's proposed annexation of 90 acres, including 25 acres set aside for wetlands restoration.

WHERE: North of West Beach Street and east of Highway 1.

PRO: City needs jobs and has track record of attracting national businesses like Annieglass, Fox Racing Shox and Continental Sales Co.

CON: Farmland will be lost with no guarantee that business will come.

as late as the 1980s, when he farmed the land himself, three crops could be planted annually, Jemison said. Now only one or two crops can be planted, and the yield — as well as revenue from leases on the land — is going down, he said.

Besides, Jemison said, if agricultural preservation were the goal, the hundreds of homes built

If You Go

WHAT: Public hearing and possible decision on city's proposed annexation of 90 acres for economic development.

WHO: The Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Wednesday.

WHERE: Board room, Pajaro Valley Unified School District, 292 Green Valley Road, Watsonville.

INFORMATION:
www.santacruzlafco.org.

in recent years on nearby property shouldn't have been allowed.

"It's pretty," Jemison said, standing at the edge of a section of the land planted in lettuce. "If you live next to it, you have dust in your house. You smell the manure. It's not so much fun."

Contact Donna Jones at djones@santacruzsentinel.com.