

Local

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Agency considers Franich annexation

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WATSONVILLE — Groups on both sides are lining up for yet another pull in the 12-year tug of war over the Franich property just outside the city's northeast corner: those who want to see the 72 acres developed into housing, parks and a school, and those who want it preserved as prime farmland.

The Local Agency Formation Commission will hear public testimony Thursday at Alianza School. A decision isn't expected that night, said LAFCO's executive director Pat McCormick. LAFCO's next meeting is June 9.

At the crux of the controversy is the city's lack of housing for low-income residents.

City officials say 2,000 families need basic shelter, and overcrowded housing exists in 26 percent of all households. And 39 percent of Watsonville's rental units are overcrowded, compared to 15 percent countywide.

If the property off of East Lake Avenue becomes part of Watsonville, owner Tony Franich promises to donate nine acres for low-income housing, which could support up to 270 housing units.

In addition, approval of the annexation would pave the way for developing up to 300 single-family and multiple-family units on 47 acres; a 16-acre city park, half of the land paid for by the city; and a school.

Celia Organista, a housing advocate who's been fighting annexation since it was proposed in 1982, said amount of low-income housing included in Franich's

Development plan has long history

Here are some key dates in the Franich annexation attempt:

●**October 1982:** the City Council voted to annex the property; the annexation was approved by LAFCO.

●**November 1982:** the Resource Defense Fund contested the validity of the annexation stating that prime agricultural land should not be urbanized. RDF sued the city, LAFCO and

Franich. The lawsuit lasted four years.

●**May 1987:** the state Court of Appeals found that the city and LAFCO failed to adequately analyze a partial annexation of the Franich property in the environmental impact review annexation was reversed.

●**May 1988:** Franich brought his case to the state Legislature and the annexation was included

in a bill. Two months later the Franich proposal was withdrawn from the legislation.

●**June 1988:** LAFCO and the city began negotiations on their roles in processing the Franich application.

●**February 1993:** after changes to the EIR, a final draft was approved by the city council.

plan isn't worth sacrificing agriculture land.

"People are swayed by the idea that we get some housing ... it's not enough," Organista said. "Some people are saying we should be happy and grateful that we're getting nine acres. I don't agree."

Organista is part of a broad group led by farm supporters, farmworker housing advocates and environmentalists who joined forces to fight the Franich property annexation after it was approved by the City Council in February.

The coalition, which includes members of the county Farm Bureau, Wetlands Watch and the League of

United Latin American Citizens, will present plans at Thursday's hearing for developing low-income housing on non-farmland.

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios voted in favor of the annexation and said the "horrible" housing conditions for city's poor can't continue.

"The need is now, the need is yesterday," Rios said. "I agree that this is a loss. If there was not such a need, I would not have supported Franich ... but Watsonville has overgrown itself."

Rios said he plans to attend the hearing.

"I really want to hear from those advocates about

where they're going to get the housing and the land, instead of the hifalutin words," Rios said. "People talk and talk but don't talk about where the money's going to come from ... it's easy to talk and hard to do."

State policy requires that LAFCO encourage development within city limits before considering open space outside the city, especially land designated "prime agricultural land."

The soil on the Franich property is considered prime agricultural land by federal, state and local standards. Though the land sat for years as unproductive apple orchard, it recently was planted with berries, said Dave Moeller, county agriculture commissioner.

Moeller and other farm advocates said they are concerned that development of the Franich property will speed up urbanization in the surrounding agriculture lands, which produce strawberries, apples, flowers and vegetables.

Moeller said the county's agriculture industry generates three times its \$244 million crop value in related industries. Of Santa Cruz County's 30,442 acres of farmland in use, about 80 percent lie in the Pajaro Valley.

City development plans outlined in a document called "Watsonville: 2005" call for 2,100 housing units in the city and in the unincorporated area of Freedom in the next 12 years.

The LAFCO public hearing will be at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Alianza School gym, 440 Arthur Road in Watsonville.