

Watsonville eyes compromise on expanding into farm land

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WATSONVILLE — City leaders appear poised to make key concessions to the county to jump-start the annexation of 94 acres east of Highway 1 along Riverside Drive.

In exchange, however, Watsonville officials will demand that the Local Area Formation Commission vote on the annexation application by May 31.

"We feel we've made significant compromises," said City Manager Carlos Palacios. "Now the ball will be in their court, and we just hope they'll act in good faith like we have."

Tonight's City Council vote comes on the heels of Mayor Oscar Rios' announcement last week that he would try to broker the compromise.

If the council agrees, Watsonville would be required to use the tougher Santa Cruz County and Coastal Commission conditions during environmental reviews of any city request to annex land on the ocean side of Highway 1.

That means, for instance, the definition of "prime agriculture land" would follow stricter county guidelines rather than any offered by the city. As a result, Watsonville likely would be unable to annex the agriculture land it originally had coveted west of Highway 1.

Although the city had asked LAFCO in late 1996 to annex 219 acres into Watsonville, the agency agreed to consider only 94 acres on the east side of Highway 1.

LAFCO board members voted 4-3 to include that land in the city's "sphere of influence." The city must return to the board with an application to actually annex those acres.

But the board made clear that before it would consider annexation, the city had to meet key demands. One was forging an agreement with the county and the Coastal Commission outlining environmental-review policies and the timing of future annexation requests.

It's by no means a sure thing the council will accept the compromise tonight, no matter how badly the city wants those 94 acres for job-producing industries.

"I plan to keep an open mind, but my concern is that we are being asked to adopt a standard for which we don't have a definition," said Councilwoman Judy Doering-Nielsen. "And have other cities been asked to sign this? ... I would like us to be held to the same standards as other cities in the county."

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— Carlos Palacios,
city manager

Mardi Wormhoudt, a county supervisor and a LAFCO commissioner, said Monday that if other cities asked to annex county land, they would be held to the same standards.

Wormhoudt also said she's glad the Watsonville council may approve the agreement.

"I would be thrilled to move off this process discussion," Wormhoudt said.

Councilman Chuck Carter said accepting the agreement "is the right thing to do" because preserving prime farm land should be a city goal. Carter said he and other council members ran on that platform, and the proposed agreement "just validates we meant what we said."

Carter said the agreement also is pragmatic: it would allow Watsonville to submit an application to LAFCO to expand city limits along Riverside Drive, which would provide space for industry.

Palacios said the city now has only 38 acres of industrial land, too little to meet the goals of attracting new jobs to lower the jobless rate and increase the city's median income.

"Without the land, we have very little ability to create new jobs," Palacios said.

Councilman Ramon Gomez said he is grappling with ensuring "we ... are not giving away too much authority to other agencies in the county."

Watsonville, said Gomez, has done most of the compromising so far, and has gotten "little in return."

On the other hand, he said, the agreement does lead to greater cooperation between various agencies involved in the annexation process.

Approving the agreement would be the final step in meeting guidelines mandated by LAFCO before it agrees to process Watsonville's application for the Riverside Drive land.

The other steps — studying

whether the nearby Landmark property was suitable for industrial development and reviewing the possibility of development within city limits — have been completed.

The council accepted the Pajaro Valley Futures Study just two weeks ago on a 6-1 vote, with Carter casting the lone dissent.

The city agreed to continue pursuing in-fill development for housing. But it balked at the study's finding that new residential development should average 26 units per acre.

To achieve that, city staff said, development of new single-family homes largely would have to be abandoned in favor of apartments or townhouses.

Watsonville's need for housing (rental vacancies stand at less than 1 percent) led project participants to conclude the higher-density residential developments should be pursued as a matter of policy.

But Watsonville officials believe the city already has the highest density in the county.

City Manager Palacios pointed out that families in Watsonville want the same amenities as any other resident in Santa Cruz County: adequate living space to raise children, parks and schools that aren't crowded.

"People want to live like the people who are on the advisory committee for the Pajaro Valley Futures Study: in single-family homes," Palacios said. "... Why aren't (other cities in the county) told how much more dense they could be, and how much more affordable housing they should have? Why are we being singled out because we are trying to confront these issues?"

The quality of life issue also bothered other council members.

Councilman Carter, however, said the city should take the study's findings more seriously.

"Everybody's opposed to urban sprawl, but at the same time most of the same people are opposed to high-density housing," Carter said. "I'm sure that nobody on this City Council wants to pave over the Pajaro Valley. ... But development is so incremental and so irreversible."

"You don't want to, piece by piece, justifying need by need, wake up some day to say, 'My God, what happened to all the ag land?'"

The annexation issue will be discussed at tonight's council session, which begins at 7:30 in the Council Chamber at City Hall, 250 Main St.