

New land-use battle brews in Watsonville

Councilman says push to annex farmland will continue despite concerns

Watsonville - Annexation
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WATSONVILLE — Environmentalists, farmers and concerned residents raised their voices Tuesday against any attempt by the city to annex 80 acres of farmland along

Riverside Drive east of Highway 1, which would overturn long-standing compromises about where Watsonville can grow.

No action was taken. The issue came before the City Council for discussion only.

But Councilman Daniel Dodge,

who brought forward the proposal to look at annexing the property for potential commercial development, did not back down. He said he believes a citizen-led group will soon emerge to push for the ques-

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The city is considering annexing 80 acres of farmland between Riverside Drive and West Beach Street in Watsonville.

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ANNEX

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tion to be placed on the ballot.

Times have changed, and so have the city's economic conditions since agreements were forged among diverse stakeholders a decade ago to put the land off limits until at least 2030, Dodge said. Development conditions placed on the city by outside interests have put a "stranglehold" on economic growth, he said.

"The city of Watsonville's elected officials need to be able to explore all options for the benefit of our residents," Dodge said. "We are in dire need of jobs."

Representatives from Watsonville Wetlands Watch and the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau urged the council not to go back to the divisive land-use battles of the past. The agreements, hashed out in the early 2000s, have served the community well, they said.

"We went from being fairly



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Councilman Daniel Dodge visits the Sakata-Kett property near Highway 1, which he hopes Watsonville residents will vote to annex.

aggressive and combative in our relationship," said Jim Van Houten, a member of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch board who participated in the Action Pajaro Valley negotiations. "We enjoy cooperative and friendly working relationships with the city and we appreciate it very much."

Speaking for the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, Darlene

Din said the group would oppose any move to convert farmland.

"We feel farming provides jobs and is an economic engine," Din said. "There's always going to be economic challenges. That's why you have a 20- to 30-year plan."

Councilman Oscar Rios agreed that agriculture provides jobs, but said people are frustrated with the slow pace

of job growth and they are pushing leaders to do something. With the recession and the loss of redevelopment funding, the city is in a tough spot.

Rios said he didn't want to go back to the fights of the past, and hoped stakeholders could work together.

"Nothing stays the same," Rios said. "Every year I see kids graduating, celebrating their graduation, and I always wonder, where are all those kids going, where are they working, where, where?"

Before the city could even move forward with an annexation attempt, city voters would have to amend Measure U, a 2002 initiative that grew out of the compromise and set Watsonville boundaries.

Dodge said there's interest in the community, though he declined to say who would lead a campaign to put the question before voters.

"I believe there's enough interest," he said. "The process begins now."

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