

Study ordered on city's West Side annexation proposal

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WATSONVILLE — The City Council, acting as the Redevelopment Agency, awarded a \$10,370 contract to a consulting firm to prepare an economic study of agriculture lands on Riverside Drive that the city plans to convert to industrial use.

DMS Research and Consulting will explore use options for four parcels of land that comprise 216 acres on the West Side of Watsonville. The city is in the process of annexing the land for development.

The Council voted 5-2 on the matter, with Councilmen Dennis Osmer and Todd McFarren voting against it. The two Councilmen cited the cost of the study as objectionable and suggested the study be done in house or the property owners pay the fee.

The study will allow the city to gather important information to "more fully understand the fiscal issues associated with annexation and development of 216 acres."

Development of the area may be years away, but the city is hoping the land will be used to create an estimated 3,555 jobs by enticing industries to build on the land. For years, Watsonville has suffered

through high unemployment, city officials say, sometimes reaching 25 percent.

The first step in the annexation process was completed Monday, when the Planning Commission voted to prezone the property to industrial. Farming advocates and environmentalists have opposed the idea of converting prime agriculture land into industrial land. They point to vacant properties within the city where industries could be housed.

In the last few months, two major industries — West Marine and Marich Confections — have decided to leave town, both going to Hollister. Marich will move its entire operation, while West Marine has already moved part of its operations there.

Options being explored for the Riverside Drive properties are opening an auto shopping center that would include numerous auto dealers and large warehouse retailer such as Costco. Opponents said jobs created by these type of businesses would most likely be low-wage jobs.

In other Council action:

•Tila Guerrero, owner of McDonalds on Freedom Boulevard,

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was given a certificate of recognition for being selected "Hispanic Business Woman of the Year" by the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

•The Council renewed its Inmate Work Release Program contract with the county. The original contract dates back to 1991 and calls for county jail inmates taking part in the work release program to work on a variety of jobs for the city, including landscaping, cleaning litter, washing city vehicles, and general manual labor.

•A motion to support the Santa Cruz Seaside Company's efforts to bring a special train from Watsonville to Santa Cruz next year was approved by the Council. The special excursion train trip would be in April 1996 and would be a one-time event. A letter from the Seaside Company to the City Council said, "a one-time event such as this would be timely as the county considers future passenger rail and transit use of the Southern Pacific rail line."