

Watsonville OKs sewer hookups despite staff fears of expansion

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Even though Watsonville City Council members claim they're not interested in annexing county land west of Highway 1, last night they certainly appeared willing to provide the city services that, once granted, often lead to expansion of the city limits.

Last night, the council majority approved one water and sewer connection on a lone city parcel in that area, and then made a statement of intent to supply those same services to an adjacent county site.

They did that despite the warning of the city staff that providing sewer and water services to the county parcel could lead to the development of more than 150 acres of agricultural land between Airport Boulevard and Harkins Slough Road on the ocean side of the freeway.

The council majority didn't seem to have any objection to that. ("We could use the housing," Councilman Rex Clark said.) But the staff did.

Public Works Director John Cooper told the council that if that area is developed, it could prompt demands for annexing the land to the city, something the city has said it wouldn't do.

"For once, the public works director is speaking against development," Cooper said.

"I'm not saying anything about annexations," Clark said. "I don't think the city of Watsonville is going to sprawl out to the ocean."

Clark and Councilman Vido Deretich said they approved the connections because developers of the two areas needed the services.

But the connections themselves weren't a problem, City Manager John Radin said. Once they are in, however, neighboring land that previously had been unbuildable will suddenly have access to city services,

which could open the door for development, he warned.

"Once you start this, you're opening a Pandora's box," Radin said.

Developers would still have to fight with state officials to change the agricultural designation before they could build on the lands. But the potential for expanding residential and other development in that area is great, according to the city staff.

"It's sorry agricultural land," said Councilman Deretich. "You couldn't grow good grass there anyway."

The whole issue of increased growth came about because a Portuguese community group wants to build a community hall on a seven-acre parcel next to a proposed hotel project on the ocean side of the freeway on Airport Boulevard.

The group can't build the community hall without a water and sewer hookup. Since the property is outside the city limits, county planners won't consider the project unless the group obtains a guarantee from the city that it will provide the services.

The property is adjacent to the proposed Pajaro Inn project, which was granted permission last night to construct a water and sewer connection under the freeway.

It will cost hotel developers about \$100,000 to tunnel under the freeway with the pipes, Radin said.

That connection was approved with little fanfare, since the property is inside the city and the project has been approved by planners.

But when the Portuguese group asked to hook up to that same line, staffers balked.

They said the city shouldn't provide any more services on that side of the freeway since it would encourage growth.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy agreed.

"I'm afraid that is just what

would happen," she said. "I think we're growing like a son of a gun and we should slow down."

She said rapid growth has caused traffic and housing problems in the city. And if the connections would encourage growth, she said, then they should not be allowed.

Councilwoman Gwen Carroll and Mayor Ann Soldo joined Murphy in her concern about increased growth in the city and its surrounding area.

But Councilman Deretich, joined by Clark, Roy Ingersoll and Joe Marsano, insisted that the community center is important enough to the community to encourage its development.

"We need one in Watsonville," Deretich said.

He and Clark advocated some type of development agreement with the Portuguese group to make sure the land is used only for a community hall.

But City Attorney Don Haile said that if development comes to that parcel, there's no guarantee it will be a community center.

Although Clark and Deretich insisted an agreement could be drawn up, Haile said he couldn't defend such an agreement if the property is sold to someone else.

The designer of the community hall, Hank Cardona, said it will probably take about three years to get the project through the county planning process and begin building.

He said he plans to build a 15,000-square-foot hall on four buildable acres on the property.

Because of the potential impacts of granting the connections, City Manager Radin said the sewer and water lines will have to be larger than first anticipated.

He said he will have the Public Works Department study the potential demand, and then report back to the council on just what size the pipes should be.