

Franich annexation ends 13-year saga

Youth center opens with compromise on hot name debate

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

The final chapter to a 13-year-old story was written in 1994 when the Watsonville City Council and LAFCO approved the annexation of the Franich property.

Also in 1994, the liberal-majority Watsonville City Council lost one of its four progressive voices, creating a three-liberal, three-conservative Council. To spice things up, a new council member was added in November, making him the seventh and all-important swing vote.

A highlight of the year was a joyous ceremony May 26 celebrating the reopening of St. Patrick's

Year in review

Catholic Church, a William Weeks-designed landmark on Main Street since 1903 that was damaged in the October 1989 earthquake. Catholic and non-Catholic members of the community joined in the dedication of the new church, which combined a more spacious design with some original features, such as the stained-glass windows, in an almost-identical style.

In 1994, the city also opened the eagerly awaited youth center, whose naming proved to be a hotly contested issue and one that pulled back the covers on a

fight that essentially pitted "old Watsonville" against the "new Watsonville."

For 13 years, Tony Franich, 83, waged a battle to have his 72 acres of agriculture land annexed for development. He fought anti-growth crusaders, lawsuits and community members bent on preserving agriculture land. In the end, Franich won. In April, the Local Agency Formation Commission voted to approve the annexation.

In July, Watsonville City Council also gave it its blessing, but not until Franich agreed to set aside a portion of the property for low-income housing. The property,

which is located along East Lake Avenue not far from East Lake Village shopping center, still is without a formal plan for development. That story is developing.

In September, the city opened its youth center, but the story was anticlimactic compared to the story surrounding the naming of the center.

Several months before the center opened, the city asked the community to come up with a name for the center. The community divided into two groups. One group wanted the center named after Cesar Chavez, the founder of the United Farm Work-

See CITY / back of section ►

CITY

► From Page 1

ers Union. The other wanted it named after Gene Hoularis, a Watsonville man that worked with area youth for many years. He was known to many as "Dad."

The Chavez backers, mostly young Latinos and progressives, were referred to by some observers as the "new Watsonville," while the Hoularis backers, some of whom were long-time Watsonville residents, were identified as "old Watsonville."

The name of Waldo Rodriguez was also submitted. Rodriguez was a long-time Watsonville community activist and one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit that brought district elections to Watsonville. Rodriguez's name, however, was almost lost in the drama played out by the Chavez and Hoularis camps.

In the March, a compromise was reached, but Chavez's name was sacrificed. In a motion by Councilman Todd McFarren, the City Council agreed to name the building the Gene Hoularis and Waldo Rodriguez Youth Center.

The November general election was a historical event. The Republicans gained control of both the House and the Senate for the first

time since the Truman administration. In Watsonville, the City Council election also had lead to a change.

Four of the seven Council seats were up for re-election. Three of them were held by liberal Council members. Councilman McFarren, one of the liberal Council members, ran unopposed. Councilwoman Betty Bobeda, a conservative, also ran unopposed. Councilman Lowell Hurst, another liberal, won a narrow victory over contender, Jody Belgard Akimoto, the daughter of Santa Cruz County Supervisor Ray Belgard.

The fourth seat was held by Parr Eves. Eves, a liberal, decided not to seek re-election. The only candidate to come forward in Eves district was Dennis Osmer, a former Council member that served from 1987 to 1989.

After the November election, the Council became a 3-3-1 board, with Hurst, McFarren and Councilman Oscar Rios on the left and Councilmen Tony Campos and Al Alcalá and Councilwoman Betty Bobeda on the right. That left Osmer in the middle to play the critical swing vote.

Since 1989, the council was a liberal majority and voting on certain issues fell into a predictable pattern. That is expected to change in the coming years, observers forecast.