

Business leaders hold annexation forum

By MICHAEL MERRILL

STAFF WRITER

RIO DEL MAR — The recurring theme of development vs. farmland dominated a land-use forum sponsored by the Santa Cruz Business Council Friday.

But the forum didn't change opinions on Watsonville's controversial Riverside Drive annexation.

Members of three panels, made up of key players in business and government, aired their views and fielded questions concerning annexations.

Panel members including Kurt Kniffin, Granite Construction; Bruce Woolpert, Granite Rock Co.; Dave Regan, Santa Cruz County Sentinel; Harvey Nickelson, Coast Commercial Bank; Jim Conklin, executive director of the Business Council; Bob Cecil, Plantronics Inc.; and Frank Minuti, Berger-Lewis

Accountancy Corp. — all directors or officers of the Santa Cruz Business Council — addressed specific needs within the community.

Education and jobs were the consistent focus; the Riverside annexation, the dominant topic.

Minuti said changes in local revenue collection, caused by the passage of Prop. 218, have forced changes in public policy. "Scotts Valley, Soquel and Watsonville have all lost money since its passage," Minuti said. He suggested the annexation, and the revenues it could produce, be thoroughly evaluated.

Watsonville Mayor Al Alcalá, a proponent of the annexation, said the forum should be titled, "Watsonville - a city in crisis." He said annexation is not about eliminating farming, it is about finding a balance between agriculture and other industries.

Watsonville Interim City Manager Carlos Palacios said 31 percent of Watsonville's population is under the age of 18. He said this is far higher than the national average of 20 percent, and one more reason Watsonville must deal with its unemployment crisis now. When these people enter the job market the problem will only get worse. "The key for us is in the private sector," Palacios said. "Jobs are the most important component

City Planner Charles Eadie, spoke at length about the number of jobs produced by agriculture and the number of jobs created by industry. He concluded that manufacturing is the only way to bring in the jobs that are needed.

Eadie's assertion was backed by Woolpert, who said by adding 216 acres to the present 533 acres al-

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Santa Cruz Business Council panelists: Kurt Kniffin, Bruce Woolpert, Dave Regan, Harvey Nickelson, Jim Conklin, Bob Cecil and Frank Minuti.

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ready dedicated to industry, the City can increase its industrial capacity by 57 percent, while losing only .6 percent of its farmland.

Watsonville farmer and member of Community Alliance with Family Farmers, Watsonville Wetlands Watch and the Sierra Club Sam Earnshaw, reminded the panel of the long range importance of food production.

Earnshaw said that as the population grows, farms will become more valuable, not less. "The history of urban destruction of prime farmland is being written on the coastal soils of California," Earnshaw said. "Taking farmland to solve jobs and housing needs is old-fashioned frontier mentality that will put Watsonville in the history books on the same page with Los Angeles and San Jose."

Quail Mountain Herbs owner Kirk Schmidt said that one issue all sides agree on is that this area is one of the most prime parcels of farmland in the country. He said it is prime alluvial soil and the most expensive in the state. "Zoning is not written in stone," Schmidt said. "Let's look at alternatives."