

# Council approves Watsonville annexation

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WATSONVILLE — In a 2-4 vote, the City Council approved the annexation of 216 acres of farmland off Riverside Drive, sending the proposal to the Local Agency Formation Commission for approval. But the threat of further court action hangs over the decision.

An attorney who is suing the city to stop the Riverside Drive annexation warned the City Council that it was "bordering on contempt of court" if it proceeded with plans to annex the property Tuesday night.

Bill Parkin, an attorney for the South County Coalition for Intelligent Planning, honed in on a perplexing dilemma facing the council as it prepared to vote: What was the intention of Judge Sam Stevens, who ordered the council to reconsider the annexation in light of a proposal to also annex 600 acres of farmland known as the Tai property?

Stevens ruled in Parkin's favor in a judgment last month, overturning the city's November approval of the annexation proposal for the 216 acres of prime farmland at Riverside Drive. His order, however, left open the question of how much depth was required in the city's further investigation of the issue that most concerned him: the cumulative impact of the Riverside and Tai annexations.

With dozens of speakers awaiting their turn at the microphone, the council and city staff debated the issue at length. City attorney Alan Smith contended that a five-page analysis of the

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issue, together with previous environmental impact reports on the annexation of the two properties, would be sufficient to answer Stevens' question.

But City Councilman Todd McFarren wasn't so sure. Like Parkin, he cited parts of Stevens' trial transcript that indicated he wanted more discussion of the cumulative impact of both annexations on the Pajaro Valley's agricultural future.

"I'm not sure how you think we've complied with Judge Stevens' order," said McFarren. "The only addition here is two or three pages of analysis."

But Smith said that a "synthesis and summary of all the documents" and the environmental impact report of the Tai property, which had not been finished at the time of the court hearing, should be adequate to meet the judge's concerns.

City analyses show that annexation of the Tai property would result in just 96 acres more of converted farmland than the city's previous plan to develop land in the area south of Corralitos

Creek, he said. And, unlike the Corralitos Creek land, the Tai property does not have prime agricultural soil, so the city reasons that the impact would not be much greater than what was originally planned.

Parkin said in an interview that the group would probably sue the city if it proceeded with the annexation vote Tuesday night.

Owen Lawler, a developer for one of the Riverside parcels, summed up the inclination of most council members in his testimony.

"No matter what we do from a legal point of view, Mr. Parkin... is going to make sure you're back in court again," he said, "so you might as well move ahead."

A lineup of former farmworkers and cannery workers who are undergoing job training with the Center for Employment Training pleaded with the council to annex the land, saying the city must sacrifice farmland to bring in the jobs that have been promised with

the proposed industrial park.

Vicente Pisano, a farmworker who is training for a new job at CET, referred to the city's motto emblazoned on a banner that hangs behind the council.

"We talk about opportunity through diversity," he said. "But for opportunity, we must sacrifice something so the economy can grow. We ask the council to move quickly to improve the future for us and our children."

But opponents of the annexation reiterated their concern that the city is trading the "bird in the hand" of agricultural jobs for the unknown promise of jobs that may never materialize on the annexed land.

Jerry Thomas of Aptos told the council that the Pajaro Valley's competitive advantage lies not in creating industrial jobs but in the unique climate and rich soil that allows four crops a year.

"Watsonville has a comparative advantage, not in industrial jobs but in expanding and identifying your agricultural opportunities," he said. "To try to trade two birds in the hand for one in the bush is the biggest mistake the council can make, and it will haunt you in the future."

The council also heard tearful testimony from several families who were targeted in a series of Dec. 6 drug raids who said they were traumatized by police misconduct during the raids. The families asked for a review of a police investigation into the allegations, saying it has taken too long, and they requested the return of personal property that was seized during the raids.