

Orchard annexation, growth topics of LAFCO meeting

Watsonville — Annexation 10/9/89

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WATSONVILLE — Because of a number of important growth issues facing the Pajaro Valley, the Local Agency Formation Commission will hold its regular monthly meeting at Watsonville City Hall at 7:30 p.m. Thursday.

LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick said the commission is hoping to gather public comment on the draft environmental impact report for the controversial Franich annexation, of 72 acres of apple orchard on East Lake Avenue, as well as the city's draft General Plan for the year 2005.

"The commission does, occasionally, like to take the show on the road on items we expect will have substantial testimony," McCormick said. "It's been more than five years since the commission held a meeting in Watsonville, so it was time to do it again."

The comments at the meeting will be incorporated into the response LAFCO will present to the city on the draft environmental impact report for the Franich annexation. All comments on the report have to be submitted to the Watsonville Planning Department by Nov. 2.

McCormick said he has only read the EIR for the Franich annexation one time, so his report to the commission will be short.

"Considering the complicated nature of the issue, it's a pretty good effort," he said.

However, he criticized the report for not having enough cost data to

determine if the alternatives to the annexation are economically viable for the city, and he wondered whether the report analyzed enough alternatives.

The analysis of the alternatives is important because the entire annexation was invalidated by the state Court of Appeal in 1987 after the court ruled that the Watsonville City Council and LAFCO failed to make adequate findings on the alternatives.

Watsonville and LAFCO approved the annexation in 1982, but it was challenged in court by the Resource Defense Fund, which ultimately won the lawsuit.

The city wants to bring the orchard into its boundaries so it can build more housing, add acreage to McKenzie Park, improve the drainage on the east side of town, and build a new road.

Environmentalists oppose the annexation because they say it will destroy valuable farm land.

Although LAFCO once approved the annexation, the commission in recent years has been dominated by no-growth advocates, including county supervisors Gary Patton and Robley Levy.

McCormick was asked about the possibility of encouraging the city to annex parts of Freedom and the Buena Vista/Calabasas roads area in exchange for allowing the annexation of the Franich property.

"There is no initiative on anybody's part" for talks on the issue, he said. "There's an opportunity, but there is no action."

McCormick said if the city took in the urban areas of Freedom, "it

would resolve some long-standing major problems. There are quid pro quos out there."

He said the area could have "better fire protection without spending more money."

As to police protection, he said, "There are some similar types of problems that the annexation would solve."

Pajaro Valley Supervisor Sherry Mehl said she didn't think the issue would be seriously addressed in the next few years with the many changes that are taking place in Watsonville's City Council and its staff.

Meanwhile, Mehl said, she has been meeting with county staff to draw up plans for forming a redevelopment agency in Freedom to solve some of the blight conditions.

Assistant County Administrative Officer Pat Busch and Redevelopment Director Tom Burns have analyzed the needs of the area and the potential tax increments that could be collected, and decided it would be worthwhile to pursue a redevelopment project, she said.

In redevelopment areas, the amount of increase in taxes (the increment) is earmarked for improvements.

Mayor Betty Murphy said she didn't think it made any sense to have the poorest city in the county — Watsonville — annex the poorest area in the county — Freedom.

"Freedom residents voted against annexation 11 years ago," she said. "I think the people of Freedom ought to know about this plan."