

Talks on use of land?

Watsonville - Annexation
City, antagonists
may come to table
after Riverside ruling

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WATSONVILLE — Another setback to Watsonville's annexation efforts has prompted Mayor Al Alcalá, a longtime advocate of annexations and development, to say the time for compromise has come.

Alcalá said today that he is ready to sit down and negotiate with the environmental-interest groups that have opposed a number of city land-use initiatives.

"Everything's negotiable," Alcalá said in an interview this morning.

A Superior Court judge ruled Thursday that the city did not complete an "initial study" of the cumulative environmental impacts of development around Watsonville, as he required for the Riverside Drive annexation.

The ruling was one more setback for city officials who have been fighting legal battles for the last year over their attempt to annex 216 acres off Riverside Drive and Highway 1 for an industrial park.

"It's essentially over a procedural issue," said attorney Bill Parkin, who represents The South County Coalition for Intelligent Planning, a collection of environmental-interest groups that filed a lawsuit last year to stop the annexation effort.

"It wasn't an initial study because the city didn't follow the formal procedure that allows for 20 days of public scrutiny," Parkin said. It was a "backroom environmental review" conducted privately that allowed only one night of public comment, he said.

But Parkin said the environmentalist coalition is willing to reach an agreement with the city: "Let's draw the line at highway 1 — we can't

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accept any development west of Highway 1."

The continuous litigation now seems to be drawing both sides closer together.

Said Alcalá: "Although the Tai Associates won't want to hear it, I've thought for a while that Highway 1 would be a good boundary." Otherwise, "it's going to be an uphill battle," the mayor said.

The Tai Associates, led by San Francisco land developer Vincent Tai, would like 646 acres west of Highway 1 to be annexed into the city for housing.

Watsonville Councilman Todd McFarren, who has opposed the Riverside annexation, said he was pleased to hear there might be a consensus and compromise. "I always thought it was too big a chunk of farmland in the first place," he said of the Riverside annexation.

But industrial expansion must come from somewhere, the mayor said. "I am constantly getting requests for parcels larger than what's available." Paul Trucking, for instance, is looking for 20 acres to relocate on, Alcalá said. Currently the largest available parcel is a five-acre lot on Loma Prieta near Airport Boulevard, he said.

In January, Judge Samuel Stevens ordered the city to reevaluate the environmental impacts of all proposed developments and annexations around the city.

The Watsonville City Council hired environmental consultants who issued a cumulative impact study in April, but Stevens, in a ruling issued Thursday, said the study did not meet the definition of an "initial study," as set forth by the California Environmental Quality Act and the state's Public Resources Code.