

Watsonville sets stage *Watsonville - annexation* for ag-land annexation

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville City Council laid the groundwork Tuesday night for a new kind of harvest on the 216 acres near Highway 1 with a vote that pre-zoned the land for industrial use.

The council stopped short of directing staff to apply to the Local Agency Formation Commission for annexation, instead giving them time to consider whether to divide the parcels up or take the whole tract to the commission at the same time.

Councilman Lowell Hurst, the swing vote on the council, finally

came down on the side of jobs — but gave a nod to his agricultural roots by saying he'd like the city to give preference to agriculture-related industry on the land.

"My heart is torn," said Hurst, who teaches agriculture at Watsonville High School. "I hear talk of open space and beautiful green fields; but it's hard for people to see the beauty when they're in the unemployment line and their family is suffering."

Hurst hastened to add that the pre-zoning doesn't mean that any land will be paved any time soon, reminding the audience that the Franch annexation took 13 years

for 76 acres.

"This doesn't do anything except set the stage to get the ball rolling," he said.

Hurst, Mayor Betty Bobeda and council members Oscar Rios and Al Alcala voted for the pre-zoning. Dennis Osmer and Todd McFarren voted against it, with Tony Campos abstaining.

The post-midnight vote came after hours of testimony from a standing-room-only crowd. Opponents of the measure, skeptical of claims that the development will provide some 3,000 jobs, invoked the specter of Seagate. That company promised hundreds of jobs at a

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site the city helped to develop. The market changed and the city was left with a "white elephant," said Chris Johnson-Lyons.

But opponents were outnumbered by a wide range of annexation proponents, including a number of unemployed former farm workers who had retrained for new industrial jobs.

"I don't know how many of you would aspire for your kids to be farmworkers," said Ramon Gomez, a former farmworker. "Please consider the futures of the Latinos who are educated and retrained to get out of the backbreaking jobs they're forced into now."