

Local

A-2 — Friday, Jan. 14, 1994 — Sentinel

Final Franich-annexation approval stalls

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — City officials are balking at conditions a county commission has required for the Franich annexation, conditions the city said would kill plans to build low-income housing and a park on the parcel.

At the request of Watsonville city leaders, the Local Agency Formation Commission delayed giving official approval Thursday on the Franich farmland annexation.

Though the long-awaited LAFCO approval had been given Dec. 8 by a narrow 3-2 vote, state law says annexation isn't official until commissioners adopt a resolution spelling out development impacts and ways to lessen those impacts on surrounding lands, drainage, police, traffic, schools, and other areas.

LAFCO had reluctantly approved the farmland-for-houses trade to help relieve the city's affordable housing shortage.

Central to the city's concerns is a requirement for a 200-foot buffer zone around the

72-acre property, to separate housing developments from adjacent farmland. Buffers help block the drift of pesticides or dust caused by farming operations, and limit exposure to residents.

LAFCO's 200-foot buffer is more than 10 times the size of the 15-foot strip planned by the city and principal property owner Tony Franich. The LAFCO buffer would require 25 acres of land, opposed to the city's version that requires only two acres. Each developable acre is worth at least \$200,000, according to county figures.

If required, the LAFCO buffer could nullify an official agreement between Franich and the city, where the property owner agreed to dedicate nine acres of land to low-income housing, and eight acres to a 16-acre city park. With the exception of 10 acres that may be purchased for a school site, the remaining land would be market-rate housing.

"The (official agreement) we had with Franich cannot be enforced, because we had looked at two acres of buffer instead of 25 acres," said City Planning Director Maureen

Owens, who called LAFCO's findings "disturbing."

"It's clearly a problem," said City Manager Steve Salomon.

Salomon said Franich's land donation for low-income housing and a park is "the reason a majority of the City Council supported the annexation."

LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick said that anything less than a 200-foot buffer would be inadequate.

"An inadequately designed buffer would have been cause for LAFCO to disapprove of this application," wrote McCormick in the findings.

Owens disagrees. "It's not supported in the environmental record that a 200-foot buffer zone is necessary, nor in the (LAFCO) testimony in December," Owens said.

The city plans to draft a response to the findings before LAFCO's next meeting. The city's 15-foot buffer plan includes the 8-foot masonry wall and a row of tall evergreen trees, also required by LAFCO.

McCormick said that even with the buffer

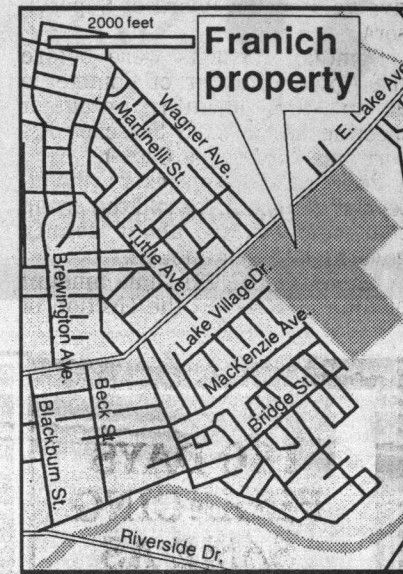
requirement, "They've got enough acreage and enough flexibility that they should be able to pull all of this off."

After subtracting nine acres donated for low-income housing and eight acres for a city park, Franich still has 55 acres left, McCormick said. The 25-acre buffer remains, but could have little effect on land slated for housing if roads and the park are used as a buffer by being placed at the property's edge, he said.

Owens said a lawsuit would be unlikely if LAFCO commissioners stick to the 200-foot buffer mentioned in their director's report.

In a letter addressed to LAFCO Wednesday, the city asked LAFCO to delay its final approval of the annexation until the city has time to prepare a response to LAFCO's findings.

LAFCO commissioners will present their conditions of the Franich annexation at their next meeting, Feb. 10 at 8:30 a.m. in the Scotts Valley City Hall, and are slated to give official approval.



Chris Carothers/Sentinel