

Freedom going, going, going.....

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Watsonville - Annexation

RP-48-96

Once opposed, residents now seek to annex

By LANE WALLACE

STAFF WRITER

The Pajaro Valley's Freedom is slipping away.

That's Freedom with a capital F, the unincorporated area with the catchy name just north and west of Watsonville.

In the past, residents have fought vigorously for their Freedom, opposing efforts to make it part of Watsonville. They made a move toward forming their own city in 1959, and in 1978 successfully opposed the city's move to annex most of Freedom.

But the anti-annexation feelings have dissipated over the years, and efforts to bring parts of Freedom into the city, initiated by residents, are being met with little or no opposition.

The long-time residents are outnumbered now, and the people are more concerned about lower taxes and utility costs — about \$250 a year less per home in the city — and better police protection than the idea of being separate.

There have been four annexations applications in the last year, covering about a third of urban Freedom, and there is a move afoot to annex an even larger area than the four annexations combined.

Coming into the city is "the lesser of two evils," said Louis Schiavon, one of a small group of long-time property owners working on the tentative plan for the larger annexation.

Annexations around Carnation Manor (near the hospital), and Mon-



These people were in the forefront of the 'Freedom On Guard' group that opposed annexation in the late '70s and early '80s. From left are Lois Lee, Nikki Pecchenino, Louise Blanchard, Bob Lee and Louis Schiavon.

Michael McCollum

ument Lumber have been approved, the Freedom School area is on the verge of approval, and a proposal for the Arthur Road-Clifford Avenue area is winding its way through the bureaucracy.

Those annexations take up about 191 acres and a population of 2,584.

Large annexation

The larger annexation, still in the discussion stages, would "fill in" the urban area as far north as Cof-

fee Lane and Compton Terrace, off Freedom Boulevard. (See adjacent story)

Pat McCormick, LAFCO's executive director, foresees more annexations, until there's little or nothing left of unincorporated Freedom.

"I see Freedom as more of a neighborhood" within Watsonville, McCormick said. The area north of the airport wouldn't necessarily become a part of the city, McCormick said.

County Supervisor Ray Belgard, 65, who grew up on Roache Road in Freedom, also foresees future annexations. "It's so logical" that the city boundaries expand, said Belgard, who remembers when Freedom was more commonly known as Whiskey Hill. "The people want to come into the city. The city isn't trying to sell it."

Schiavon, who came to Freedom

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Freedom annexation

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as a youth nearly 70 years ago, was for years opposed to annexation. He was president of the Freedom Boosters in 1959 when residents took steps to form their own city.

Schiavon said Watsonville "is more receptive" to Freedom's needs than in the past.

He said Freedom has had difficulty getting money from the county, in part because the supervisors from South County "have been outnumbered and outvoted" by the liberal majority on the board.

Local control

By coming into the city, Schiavon said, Freedom will have a better chance for local control.

John Ivelich, who is working with Schiavon, said he sees the possibility of a City Council member from Freedom. As the city grows, the council districts will have to be redrawn.

Schiavon said it was Gary Patton, the liberal county supervisor, who pushed for a sewer hookup moratorium in Freedom from 1980-88.

One of the people who has talked with Schiavon and Ivelich is Bill Johnston, Watsonville mayor from 1971-83 and a City Councilman before that.

Annexation "should have happened 20 years ago," said Johnston, who has had his real estate and insurance office in Freedom since 1948 and was a long-time volunteer at the fire station a few doors away.

Johnston was mayor in 1978 when the city tried to annex a big chunk of Freedom — 522 acres and a population of 4,000.

The tax structure was changed by Prop. 13 earlier that year, and suddenly it was cheaper to live in the city instead of the county.

The city's move prompted a quick and angry response from Freedom residents. They formed the Freedom Information Committee, and turned out in large numbers to protest the city's move.

Protest successful

Residents rallied against the move, circulating petitions and showing up in large numbers at City Council meetings to protest. The opponents gathered petitions of protest from more than half the landowners, which killed the annexation.

"There was basically a mistrust of elected officials of city government," said Nikki Pecchenino, a leader of the anti-annexation effort. "The mistrust was so pervasive that we didn't need to put forth a gargantuan effort," said Pecchenino, who grew up in Freedom. Pecchenino, who now lives in Scotts Valley, served as an aide to county Supervisor Robley Levy from 1981-93.

Even after the annexation protest, the Freedom people stayed politically active. They formed Freedom On Guard, which lasted into the mid-80s. "It was mainly a political watchdog," Pecchenino said.

The group pushed for road signs that said "entering Freedom" and "leaving Freedom" on Freedom Boulevard, which were stolen long ago.

The 1978 annexation effort came 19 years after a drive to incorporate Freedom. That 1959 drive was prompted by the city's move to annex the businesses along Freedom Boulevard, which was successful.

Freedom residents opposed it, and took steps to form their own city, with a population of 5,400. "We felt independent," Schiavon said. "We had a loyalty."

The idea of Freedom cityhood became difficult when the city made concessions and took Town and Country shopping center on Main Street into the city, Schiavon said, reducing the tax base for the would-be-city.

The Freedom cityhood failed "to my regret," Schiavon said. "We would have been out of the clutches of the county."

Nobody to fight

Today, there doesn't appear to be anybody willing to fight for Freedom's independence. Some of those who fought hard in 1978 have died, and others have moved away. Those still in Freedom express sadness, but seem resigned to what's happening.

"The sense of identity no longer is evident," said Pecchenino, who works for the YWCA in Watsonville and still keeps tabs on local events. "It's obviously a different city government."

Retired Freedom postmaster Bob Lee has lived in Freedom for 50 years and has been a staunch supporter of keeping the areas separate. When he moved here, there were few people between Freedom and the city limits.

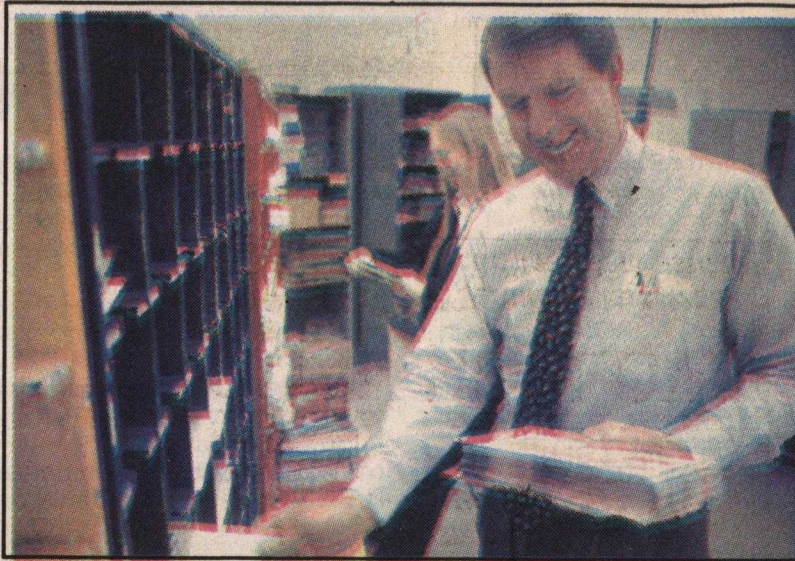
"We had apple trees out here," Lee said. "We thought it was quite a way" between Freedom and Watsonville.

When they travel, Lee and his wife are sure to tell people they're from Freedom.

"Oh definitely," Lee said. "We have it on our license plate holder." The Lees have also found Freedom in other states, visiting several of the seven towns known as Freedom in the United States.

Grace Hackwell, who was involved in the anti-city efforts in 1978, said, "It's kind of a shame" to see the annexations.

But she acknowledges that the people who have moved here since may be getting "exactly what they



Michael McCollum

Acting Freedom Postmaster Dale Campbell sorts mail with senior clerk Mary Ivison.

It's still Freedom at the post office

FREEDOM — Parts of Freedom are being annexed to Watsonville, but it's not affecting postal services.

"Nothing has changed," said Dale Campbell, acting Freedom postmaster. Even if they're annexed to the city, people with Freedom addresses will retain them, Campbell said.

Even if most of Freedom is eventually swallowed up by Watsonville, that won't mean the end of the Freedom post office, Camp-

bell said.

"It's an extremely long process to eliminate a post office," he said. Letters bound for Freedom misaddressed as Watsonville, or vice versa, will still usually reach their destination.

"We have a couple of hundred a day" that should say Watsonville, Campbell said. Those are sent over to Watsonville, where the post office has letters that should say Freedom.

want" with annexation.

It's still Freedom

All those interviewed said Freedom won't fade away entirely. "With a name like Freedom, it won't go away" as a neighborhood, Pecchenino said.

Ben Evans, who became a Freedom fireman 20 years ago, said the idea of Freedom as a separate area has lessened over the years, even before the current annexation drives.

"Most people don't have a clue" whether they're in or out of the city, said Evans, chief of the Pajaro Valley Fire District, which was formed by merger of the Salsipuedes and Freedom districts last year.

When there's a fire, Evans said, nobody worries about whether it's the city or his firefighters. Like any other neighboring firefighters, Watsonville and Pajaro Valley have a mutual-aid policy.

As areas are annexed into the city, the fire district loses some tax revenue. Had the fire districts not merged, the annexations would have made it difficult for the Free-

dom district to survive alone.

Until the last few years, the Freedom district resisted any mergers or annexations, especially the possibility of becoming part of the Watsonville Fire Department.

The merger with Salsipuedes still allows for local control, said Randy Craven, chairman of the Pajaro Valley Fire District board.

"I hate to see it happen," Craven said of the annexations. His late father, Norm, was a longtime Freedom reserve firefighter and fire board member.

Tough county rules

Craven said people with thoughts of building are favoring annexation "because the county is so difficult to work with."

In recent years, owners of land adjoining the city have sought annexation, because it's generally easier to get permits from the city. The Carnation Manor annexation, approved last year, was supported by owners of undeveloped commercial land on Green Valley Road.

At public hearings for the 106-acre Freedom School annexations, residents said better police protec-

tion was a key reason they wanted to become part of the city. The newly incorporated area will be patrolled by city police, instead of sheriff's deputies.

The city is committed to maintaining a ratio of one officer to every 700 residents, said Police Chief Terry Medina. The Sheriff's Office ratio is about double that.