

Annex OK'd in South County

Watsonville - Annexation
10-20-05

90-acre site gets tentative approval for development

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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville will be permitted to annex 90 acres on its western edge for economic development — maybe.

At the end of a nearly four-hour meeting, a majority of the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission said they wanted their lawyer to ensure a last-minute agreement between the city and affected property owners that would ban big-box stores on the site is binding.

But they approved the annexation in concept provided LAFCO's lawyer finds the agreement can be enforced.

The significance of the question was evident from the roughly 150 people who packed the Pajaro Valley Unified School District's board room and spilled over into the hallway.

The property, an L-shaped tract on the city's western edge, is a cornerstone of the city's long-term economic strategy. City leaders hope the acquisition of the property, now used to grow strawberries and lettuce, will pave the way for private investors to develop a business park for small factories

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or office space on the site. They say as many as 2,000 jobs could be created over the next 20 years.

But some have worried that the property would be used for big-box retailers or housing.

City leaders tried to ease those fears by submitting at the hearing an agreement with property owners that would limit retail or housing developments with restrictions on deeds.

Several commissioners said the document came too late for adequate review.

Earlier in the evening, speakers talked of the need for jobs, for housing, for a better life for the residents of Watsonville.

Aurelio Gonzalez said he has lived in the city since his father brought the fam-

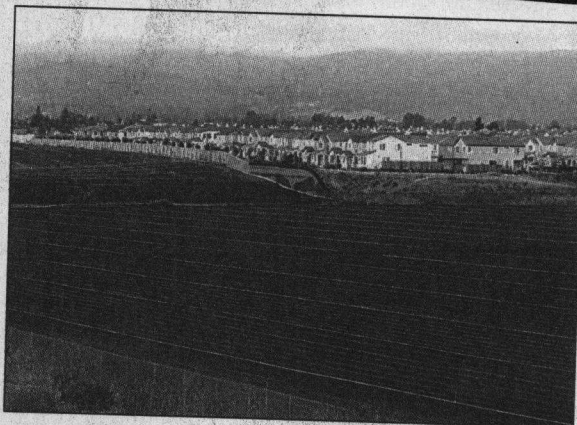
ily to the city 38 years ago to work in the fields.

"My father saw a future for us in the city of Watsonville," Gonzalez said. "But I am the only one left (here) in my family because of the lack of jobs. I work in San Francisco. I see our need for employment."

Of 45 speakers, only one — a member of the Sierra Club concerned about the loss of farmland — spoke against the proposal.

That's a far cry from 1999, the last time LAFCO considered the annexation, said Lisa Dobbins, executive director of the nonprofit land-use group, Action Pajaro Valley. Then the community was divided between those who feared the loss of farmland and those who wanted jobs, she said.

Since then, diverse stakeholders, from environmentalists and farmers to housing advocates and business leaders, came together under the auspices of Action



Pajaro Valley to craft a compromise on city growth. The result was Measure U, a 2002 initiative passed by city voters that sets boundaries for Watsonville growth.

The annexation of Manabe-Burgstrom was part of that compromise.

The Manabe-Burgstrom land has the go-ahead to be developed into an industrial park.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

"I encourage you to take stock of unprecedented support that you will hear tonight," Dobbins said. "We have come a long way."

That support included groups such as Watsonville Wetlands Watch, the California Alliance of Family Farmers and the Monterey Bay

Central Labor Council, all opposed in the past.

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