

# Fate of Watsonville land awaited

## Decision:

Whether a plot of farmland will be annexed for housing and public use is expected to be finalized this week.

BY PAULINE ZENNER  
Special to the Mercury News

An 82-year-old Watsonville land owner says he's grown gray, bald and toothless the last 13 years waiting for the city to decide whether to annex his 72 acres of agricultural land off East Lake Avenue for development.

Environmental groups, farmers and housing advocates who have fought against the hotly debated annexation attempt will meet alongside land owner Tony Franich and city officials at Watsonville City Hall on Wednesday morning to await the decision of the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).

LAFCO, a Santa Cruz County agency, is the

final review panel. The Watsonville City Council endorsed the development in February.

For years the Franich family property was used as an apple orchard. In the past year it has been converted to berry production.

Annexation was first approved in 1982, but after a four-year lawsuit, the decision was reversed by the courts. It has been moving through the system ever since.

Franich has agreed to donate nine acres to the city for 180 to 270 affordable housing units. Five additional donated acres would be part of a 16-acre park. Ten acres would be

purchased by the city for an elementary school, and the balance of the property would be developed for 394 to 577 market-rate housing units.

LAFCO commissioners have listened in past months to countless hours of public testimony pitting the value of saving prime agricultural land and farm jobs against the city's desperate need for the affordable housing units offered as part of the Franich package.

Celia Organista, housing committee chairwoman for the League of United Latin Ameri-

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### FRANICH

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can Citizens who has headed the crusade to fight development of prime agricultural land in the Pajaro Valley, said she is concerned that the annexation will be approved.

"If LAFCO votes against the annexation, then we've accomplished our goal to preserve agricultural land, which equals jobs," Organista said. "If they approve it, then prime ag land will be sacrificed for development that doesn't meet the needs of the community."

Some housing advocates say the project does not include enough low-cost housing.

City officials worked into the early morning hours last week to agree on a preliminary general plan, which LAFCO commissioners requested to help them make a final decision.

LAFCO officials said that without seeing the city's long-term growth objectives they couldn't guarantee how the Franich vote would turn out.

The question that commissioners face is whether urbanizing the Franich site outweighs state and local policies to guide development away from

prime agricultural land.

"If the annexation is denied, then the city or property owner can wait a year and refile again," said Pat McCormick, LAFCO executive director. "If it is annexed, the city would proceed to review development applications on the property."

The decision could be made quickly or could take all morning, McCormick said, "but I certainly expect a decision to be made."

The project would make it easier for the city to realize its population projections in the general plan, said Councilman Todd McFarren.

"If not, it's back to the drawing board," McFarren said. "We will then have to look at annexing other property."

Jeff Brown, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, said he is hopeful the decision will not be made independent of Watsonville's total growth plan.

Organista said people are tired of the issue.

"We're worn out, and we want LAFCO to make a decision so we don't have to deal with this anymore," she said. "We just don't want them to make the wrong decision."