

Watsonville

Annexation

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# Proposed Annexations to Be Debated

**DRIVEN LARGELY BY THE OBVIOUS** significance of a decision that will shape Watsonville's future economic development, the debate over several hundred acres of land marked for annexation by the city has been a passionate one. Developers and farmers, environmentalists and city officials have taken complicated but firm stands on the rezoning of prime agricultural land that could mark a huge shift in Watsonville's traditionally agricultural economic focus.

Surely many would argue that this shift began in the '80s with the decline of frozen-food plants in Watsonville, but the fact that the city is preparing to annex and rezone 216 acres near Riverside Drive and a 600-acre parcel west of Highway 1 and Lee Road for commercial and residential use — over the objections of agribusiness — may mark a further transformation for Watsonville's long-troubled economy.

The Monterey Bay Chapter of the Association of Environmental Professionals is attempting to bring many of the competing interests together Wednesday for a panel discussion on the annexations, with the goal of providing the public with the most rounded debate possible on the decisions now facing the Watsonville community.

The Watsonville 2005 General Plan in general and the two specific annexations will be briefly described by Charles Eadie from the Watsonville Planning Department at the AEP's meeting in Watsonville, before the discussion is turned over to a panel that includes Christine Johnson-Lyons of Watsonville Wetlands Watch; Ken Kines, representing the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau; and Gary Deghi, of Huffman & Associates, a biological consulting firm hired by San Francisco real estate developer Vincent Tai. Tai wants to develop on the 600-acre tract west of the Lee Road annexation, which is commonly referred to as the Tai property.

Johnson-Lyons and Kines will represent the environmental and agricultural objections to the annexations, while Deghi and an as-yet unconfirmed panel member — plus, to a certain extent, Eadie — will provide proponent views on the issue.

AEP is a non-profit group made up of private and public sector planning professionals that include biologists, hydrologists, public agency heads, traffic engineers, Environmental Impact Report researchers and more; and they're inclined by the nature of their business to be plenty thorough.

"We staff the decision-makers," says AEP member Mystere Sapia. "They expect to have the best information available."

Sapia says the group wanted to balance the panel with opposing opinions because members of the group — which has no official position on the issue — have a range of views themselves. She says the panel discussion was designed to provide the public with essential information "in a different form than just going to the planning department and reading the applications, which is very two-dimensional."

*The AEP's February meeting and panel discussion will be held Wednesday at 7 p.m. at the Marinovich Community Center, 102 Second St. in Watsonville. Admission is free for AEP members, \$2 for non-members.*

— Steve Palopoli

"Good Times"

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