

# ✓ Chamber supports <sup>Watsonville</sup> Franich annexation

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture Board of Directors has voted to support the Franich annexation.

At a meeting Friday, the chamber board was urged to oppose the annexation of the 72-acre apple orchard on East Lake Avenue by the chamber's agricultural subcommittee.

Ron Tyler of the UC Agricultural Extension and a member of the subcommittee, said, "We had recommended no annexation because it's prime agricultural land. Our main point is that the soils are still suitable for growing crops."

The subcommittee said all three types of soil found on the property are suitable for all crops grown in Santa Cruz County, although certain row crops such as brussels sprouts and artichokes grow better along the coast.

Property owner Tony Franich has insisted the land is unsuitable for farming. But his complaint has more to do with the drainage problems caused by Caltrans' storm drain than with the type of soil there, according to Tyler.

While the chamber board majority agreed that the 72-acre apple orchard is still viable farm land, Chamber President Larry Donatoni said the decision to support annexation was "based on the economic issues of affordable, high-density housing.

"Also, it makes logical sense to annex land that's next to the city," Donatoni said. The chamber said if annexation occurs, the city's agricultural buffer policy should be enforced.

As to the issue of a local versus state decision, Donatoni said the chamber would like the decision to be made locally.

Franich has hired a lobbyist and persuaded an assemblyman from Arcata to carry a special

bill which, if passed, would let the annexation go through and bypass the Local Agency Formation Commission.

Franich has said LAFCO won't give him a fair hearing, citing the commission's attempt last fall to eject him from the Salsipuedes Sanitary District, to which he has been paying taxes for 22 years. The commission ultimately retained the property in the district.

LAFCO and the city of Watsonville approved the annexation in 1982, but the decision was overturned in 1987 by the state Court of Appeals.

With the threat of the bill passing the Legislature by the end of the month, LAFCO and city officials are negotiating a memorandum of understanding which would set the procedures for annexation hearings.