

Annexation plan rejected

Watsonville - Annexation

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■ **Watsonville:** Agency turns down bid to convert 94 acres of farmland into industrial park.

BY TERRI MORGAN
Special to the Mercury News

Watsonville's hopes of annexing 94 acres of farmland for an industrial park were dashed this week when its two-year effort was rejected by the board governing land boundary changes in Santa Cruz County.

City leaders had hoped to gain jurisdiction over the property to reduce unemployment,

which averages 19 percent in Watsonville.

"We're very discouraged," Mayor Oscar Rios said Wednesday. "We feel that we complied with all the conditions they put on us and put a good plan forward."

Rios said the commission failed to consider the city's needs. Watsonville has many young people who desperately need the types of entry-level jobs the industrial park would have

provided, he said.

"We feel that some of those people who made that decision are out of touch with reality," Rios said. "We feel very strongly that having double-digit unemployment is not right."

Commissioners for the Local Agency Formation Commission voted 4-3 Tuesday against the city's proposal to annex the Manabe-Burgstrom land. Nine parcels used for growing lettuce and strawberries form the L-shaped property, bordered by Highway 1 to the west, the Union Pacific Railroad tracks to the south and the city limits on the east and

north.

LAFCO Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt, who also serves on the board of supervisors, said she considered Watsonville's concerns before motioning to reject the proposal. She did say, however, that she believed the annexation would not warrant the loss of premium farmland.

"As LAFCO commissioners, we are bound by state law . . . and local LAFCO policies to direct development away from prime agricultural land," Wormhoudt said. "Whereas I do

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consider the problems of jobs and housing in Watsonville to be serious and important, I did not believe the annexation of that land would address that issue in a particularly significant way."

The city council is expected to consider its next steps when it meets Aug. 24. Although Watsonville could resubmit the proposal to the agency at any time, Rios said city leaders would be unlikely to do so under the current LAFCO board, whose majority he charged is forcing its anti-growth policies on the city.

"We're back to the drawing table," Rios said. "We'll continue to look for creative ways to provide

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opportunities for people to have jobs. We need to organize ourselves in this community, raise voting levels and participate in some of the policies in this county and expose them for a sham."

Watsonville officials had originally hoped to put 216 acres under the city's sphere of influence, a necessary step before annexation. In 1997, however, the agency approved less than half that acreage.