

Hearing will focus on Watsonville annexations

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville City Council will revisit the divisive Riverside Drive annexation Tuesday in a public hearing ordered last month by a Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge.

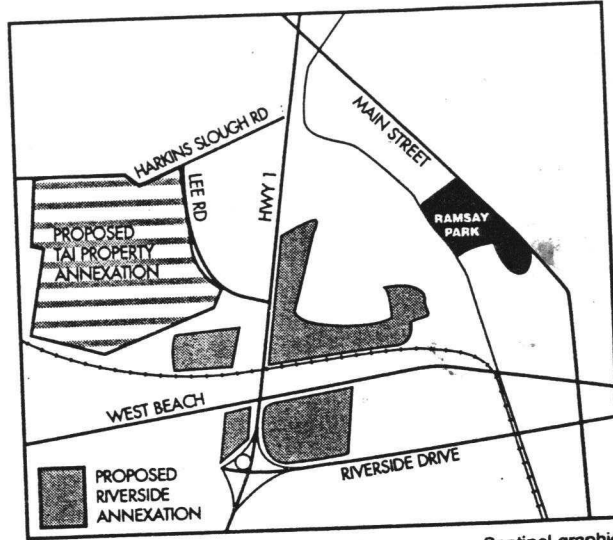
The city had already approved rezoning the 216 acres of prime farmland for use as an industrial park, and had sent a request to the Local Agency Formation Commission to make the land a part of the city. Last month, the City Council took up another proposed annexation — the 600-acre Tai property, west of Highway 1, for a proposed housing development.

But a lawsuit against the Riverside annexation, filed by the South County Coalition for Intelligent Planning, contended that the city should consider the combined impact of the two annexations, rather than allowing Riverside to proceed on a separate track.

Judge Sam Stevens ruled in favor of the group last month, striking the city's approval of the Riverside Drive annexation plan and asking for more discussion of the combined impact of the city's growth plan.

Stevens' two-page order did not specify what the city must do in order to satisfy his requirement. The city maintains that the current studies are sufficient, but opponents are asking for a more in-depth environmental review — something Stevens' order did not require.

Annexation proponents say they've already considered the repercussions of the loss of both parcels to the county's agricultural economy, and they say it will be minimal.



Sentinel graphic

A city staff report to the council, issued late Friday, reviews a series of studies conducted by city consultants and concludes that the evidence shows developing the Tai property will not harm agricultural production in the valley.

When the Riverside annexation was first proposed and included in the city's general plan in 1994, it included a full environmental review of the proposal. At that time, the Tai annexation was only considered

a "special study area," and its inclusion in the city limits was not evaluated in terms of environmental or agricultural effects. But since then, the city conducted a full environmental impact report on the Tai property. City officials believe that report, taken together with the original one for the Riverside property, will answer Stevens' concerns.

Annexation opponent Keith Sugar, an attorney for the South County Coalition for Intelligent Planning, argued Friday that the city should voluntarily conduct another environmental review.

"If the situation is as the city of Watsonville claims," said Sugar, "why not conduct an EIR and put all the apprehension and acrimony to rest?"

City Councilman Todd McFarren, one of two on the seven-member council who voted against the Riverside annexation, agrees that such a review would be helpful.

"It seems that's the safest way to go, but not only that, it's the right thing to do," he said. "The problem is that when you do them one at a time, you fail to get the big picture. I'm hoping that the majority will come to some kind of accommodation on this."

McFarren cited a variety of projects in the works that will produce growth within the city even without the two new annexations, beginning with The Overlook shopping center on the north end of town and the development of a major subdivision and a school on the recently annexed Franich property. If the city abandons the proposed annexation of the Tai property and the proposed housing complex there, and concen-

trates on annexing and developing the Riverside property, it will be in a better position to evaluate future needs, he argued.

"Then we can look at the effects of these projects. ... We have a lot of stuff coming up in the next few years," he said. "At some point they're all going to come to fruition and we're going to be overwhelmed."

But others on the council believe the city has already waited too long to confront the urgent housing and job shortages that face local residents, and that the annexations must proceed as quickly as possible.

Councilman Oscar Rios, a strong advocate of an industrial park on Riverside Drive, opposes the Tai annexation, and doesn't believe the two should be linked.

"There are so many constraints on Tai, it could take us forever," he said. "That should not hold us from moving on Riverside and really bringing about jobs that are desperately needed in this community."

Rios was frustrated by the court order, and believes that no further environmental review is necessary.

"It's been done in the general plan; we have gone through this already," he said. "This is just another tactic of people who don't want anything to be done. If you want to improve the situation in this town, we have to do some compromising. How else are we going to alleviate some of the pain people are going through in Watsonville?"

The hearing begins at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the City Council Chambers, City Hall, 250 Main St.