

Forum to weigh both sides of annexation

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WATSONVILLE — To supporters, annexing 219 acres of prime farmland at Riverside Drive into the city of Watsonville is an easy call — the overriding need for jobs and revenue far outweighs the need for prime farmland.

To opponents, it's not so simple. The prime farmland, they say, is the absolute best in the world and once it is lost, it is gone forever.

The Local Agency Formation Commission will hear both sides of the argument at a public hearing Wednesday night, not just for Riverside but other parcels as well. After that, the LAFCO board will have 70 days to decide about allowing the land into the city's sphere of influence, which would pave the way for a formal annexation request.

Economic reports issued by the city and by a consultant hired by LAFCO both seem to support the city's stance — that the land is needed to expand the city's tax base and lower its unemployment

rate. However, a fact sheet put out by annexation opponents disputes much of the reports.

A key sticking point seems to be how much land is available in the city. Both the city and LAFCO say 21 acres. But opponents running the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley Farmlands and Wetlands say the figure is much higher — some 70 acres.

"Let's say that's true, and we have all that land — it's still woefully inadequate," assistant city planner Charlie Eadie said. "It doesn't net us one-seventh of the jobs we need."

The city is thinking big. With the annexation, the city believes industry will come to town, bringing with it jobs for the many unemployed. In fact, Eadie said, companies are already contacting the city about locating in the Riverside area.

Eadie said the city hopes to add 3,500 jobs with the new land, which would be zoned industrial.

And with the city's distinction as an "enterprise zone," companies

would have even more incentive to locate here. They would get tax breaks for doing their part in stimulating the city's economy.

According to LAFCO's economic analysis, Watsonville is already a major job center for the region. It accounts for 13 percent of the area's employment — much of it in agriculture — but only 6 percent of the population.

It also says that half of the jobs in Watsonville belong to people who live outside the city. And most of those are high-paying, high-skilled jobs. With the addition of industry, workers currently in agriculture could make the switch to assembly jobs.

Opponents, led by farmer Sam Earnshaw, argue that the unemployment figures are misleading. Because agricultural work is seasonal, unemployment fluctuates depending on the time of year. Without agriculture, Earnshaw argues, the city's unemployment rate would be 6.8 percent — still high but certainly closer to the state average of about 5 percent.