

Watsonville Seeks Annexation Vote

City Council asks LAFCO to review restrictions

by Helen Meservey

Watsonville - annexation
THE WATSONVILLE CITY COUNCIL has voted unanimously not to take no for an answer.

In a decision Nov. 18, the council decided to ask the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to reconsider the city's application to include 733 acres of farmland into its jurisdiction, or "sphere of influence."

LAFCO Commissioner Katherine Beiers, who is also a Santa Cruz City Council member, says the board would review a reconsideration carefully.

"Possibly they'll have information that we haven't seen, but I was very firm in my last decision," she says. "For something with such a large determination as a change in land use, I had to be overwhelmingly convinced that this was the only way to go. It was such a big matter and would have repercussions for decades."

By a vote of 5-2, LAFCO last month denied the city's request, granting instead 94 acres near Riverside Drive and another 249 acres near Buena Vista Drive for a total of 343 acres. In addition, conditions were added to the commission's Oct. 1 decision, including one caveat that requires city officials to forge an agreement with LAFCO and the California Coastal Commission before petitioning for additional land on the west side of Highway 1. The commission ratified its vote Oct. 29.

City officials were sorely disappointed with the commission's decision. Council-

man Lowell Hurst, also a LAFCO commissioner, later told *GOOD TIMES* the board's decision was "like giving a guy in critical care a couple of aspirin."

For more than two years, Watsonville's leaders have explored ways of expanding the city's real estate in an effort to create much needed housing and jobs: Over the last 20 years, the population in Watsonville, which now copes with unemployment that hovers around 20 percent, has nearly doubled to 35,000.

In response, city planners had been eyeing several hundred acres of privately owned farmland to develop for commercial and residential use. One property included four parcels comprising 219 acres near Riverside Drive (Highway 129). Annexation proponents had said the proposed development of that site would yield 3,500 jobs.

The other coveted site, 600 acres known as the Tai property (after its owner, Vincent Tai of San Francisco), is located west of Highway 1 and Lee Road. Plans for the development of that site — which included 300 acres of certified organic farmland considered by many to be the finest in the world — called for the construction of 1,800 residential units, a commercial center and a golf course.

The Watsonville City Council's proposal was hotly debated by farmers and opponents of farmland development. Even some proponents expressed reluctance towards developing farmland, but high unemployment and inadequate housing, they said, took precedence.

There is no appellate body beyond LAFCO: The commission makes the final determination in land-use issues.

"We are the very last body, so reconsideration is the end point, except for the courts," Beiers adds.