

Annexation was more than city bargained for

Watsonville - Annexation
Watsonville doesn't
get federal funds for
Freedom-Carey area

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Be careful what you wish for.

This city annexed the Freedom-Carey area thinking it would bring more money into city coffers once the census counted all the new residents.

But the census didn't recognize Freedom-Carey

WATSONVILLE as part of Watsonville,

and that means the city might have all the expenses of a new neighborhood — but no extra federal money to support it.

The city faces some hard facts about the real costs of the annexation.

Community Development Director John Doughty knew the city would have to spend money to bring the area's streets and houses up to code. But it wasn't until after Freedom-Carey and its some 2,000 residents were annexed to the city in July that county planners told Watsonville the annexation would be more expensive than they thought.

"We met with the county code-enforcement person, Dave Loughlin, and what we discussed was the fact that ... half the parcels had some sort of code-enforcement activity on them at one point or another," Doughty said, meaning that everything from out-of-code fences and signs to immediate health hazards should be inspected and brought up to code.

Doughty estimates there are 600 to 700 houses and apartments in the annexation area, which includes Carey Avenue southwest of Freedom Boulevard and the Freedom Shopping Center at the corner of Freedom and Airport boulevards.

He said most of the estimated 300 to 400 cases are pending or active and "many have been languishing for years."

Doughty says code-enforcement issues are par for the course when cities annex inhabited areas. Freedom-Carey, however, has what he terms "substantial issues."

"I've never been involved in an annexation where half the parcels had enforcement action," he said.

The department, which is short one inspector and one code-compliance officer, has been able only to react to complaints, not get ahead of its backlog.

"Those properties that were red-tagged, the owners have come forward and talked to us," Doughty said. Those are the only cases from the area that have been dealt with.

Doughty is working on a program to require violators to pay for part of the "real costs" of code compliance — staffing time and legal costs. The City Council would have to approve it.

"The vast majority of the population abides by the law," he said. "It becomes a question of who should pay for code enforcement. We believe it should be the folks who create the need."

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