

City moves closer to annexation approval

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Landmark study accepted by council, completing one LAFCO condition

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville City Council took one more step toward the annexation of 94 acres into the city as it unanimously approved a land feasibility study, a mandate imposed by the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) prior to approval of the annexation.

The study and analysis on the Landmark property, 156 acres located on the west side of town north of Riverside Drive, was approved by council members and fulfills one of three conditions of approval imposed by LAFCO nearly one year ago.

The council unanimously accepted the study, and moved to request LAFCO's approval and acceptance as well. "I want to make sure our friends at LAFCO are aware that we've considered our options," Councilman Lowell Hurst said. "I want to make sure that the discussion we have... is, in fact, adequate enough to meet their

needs. I don't want to wait two years for that, either."

LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick congratulated the council on completing one of the conditions for approval.

"You're moving forward on an item that's been mutually difficult," McCormick said. He added, however, he did not know how the commission would address the council's efforts.

"We're sort of inventing the process as we are going," he said.

According to the study, conducted by Economic & Planning Systems, Inc. (EPS) in Berkeley, the Landmark property is "not competitive as an industrial site" in the near future.

EPS Vice President David Zehnder walked the council through the study, which concluded that single-family residence development was the most viable option for the city and that property at this time.

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"We found a result which is very close to what you might expect," Zehnder said. "We feel that at this time, given current market conditions, single-family housing is the most viable option.

"Right now, your city is in a situation where land is very constrained, (but) with Landmark, there are too many on-site issues," he said.

Zehnder defended the study as an analysis, not a prediction of Watsonville's bleak future for land use on the hilly site.

"This is an analysis, this is not a determination of what the future will be," he said. "Circumstances can change — we don't think it's likely, but we're not going to say it

can't change."

Though Councilman Todd McFarren also voted to accept the study, he questioned the study's findings.

"I don't have any beef with the study," McFarren said, though he said the study's conclusion of single-family housing as the most viable option makes Watsonville a "bedroom community where people can commute to San Jose."

"The study says to me the best way to turn a buck on the land is to build single-family housing," he said. "My concern is whether that's the best thing for the city, and I have my doubts about that."

The conclusions from this study strengthens the city's argument to LAFCO commissioners that the Landmark area is not feasible for industrial development, one of the reasons why city officials pressed that

land near Riverside Drive be added into the city's sphere of influence.

In response to the city's request for the addition, LAFCO commissioners made it a condition that a feasibility study first be done on the Landmark property.

"We believe the city has fulfilled this condition," said Watsonville city planner Charles Eadie.

Eadie added the city is nearing fulfillment of the other two conditions LAFCO imposed, which included the consideration of the Pajaro Valley Futures study, expected for final review and approval by the council early next month.

City staff has also been meeting with representatives of the Coastal Commission and LAFCO to reach a mutual understanding on guidelines for requesting land annexations. Eadie said participants "were very close to closure" on their meetings.