

Farmland annexation stalled

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Court tells Watsonville to reconsider plan to convert prime fields to industry

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Foes of farmland development claimed victory Monday when a Santa Cruz County judge ordered the city of Watsonville to reconsider plans for annexing more than 200 acres of prime agricultural land for industrial use.

Superior Court Judge Samuel Stevens told the city to take another look at the environmental impact of its plan to annex 216 acres of farmland along Riverside Drive, said Bill Parkin, a lawyer for environmental groups that sued to block the move.

The judge agreed with environ-

mentalists that the city must consider the cumulative impact of that plan along with another proposed annexation of some 600 acres of agricultural land west of Lee Road for residential development, Parkin said.

"The main thing that stuck in the court's craw was that the city is basically gobbling up prime agricultural land right and left and not considering the whole picture," said Keith Sugar, an attorney also representing the envi-

ronmentalists.

City officials and Riverside Drive farmers, however, said the ruling adds more delay to years of municipal planning aimed at drawing badly needed jobs to a city struggling with soaring population growth and unemployment.

"It delays the process of diversifying our economy and bringing new hope and opportunities to people," said City Councilman Lowell Hurst.

No one argues that the farm

land in question is top-quality, producing lettuce, salad greens and strawberries.

But Watsonville is surrounded by prime agricultural land and, after years of community discussion, city leaders agreed to sacrifice some of it for more jobs, Hurst said. Watsonville's population has reached nearly 34,000, with almost a third under age 18 and poised to enter the job market, he said.

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Court halts annexation of prime agricultural land for industrial use

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"We're up against a very difficult situation," Hurst said. "I don't think we should have a rush to judgment on any of these issues. But there's a lot of social and economic issues that we have to move forward on to fight against gangs and crime and a lot of that comes down to people having a job."

Floods from urban runoff

Louis Jemison, whose family-owned company has been growing crops on 56 acres along Riverside Drive for nearly a century, said the annexation puts development in an area already affected by urban encroachment while protecting other surrounding farmland. An acre of his land, he said, is flooded in water from urban runoff.

"They're annexing land like ours that's already impacted," Jemison said. "You come up with a general plan with a buffer zone that draws urban lines that make sense, then it looks to me like an annexation that will protect farmland that surrounds the city of Watsonville."

The annexation and industrial zoning of the Riverside Drive farmland was studied as part of the city's general plan in 1994 and environmental review was approved by the council in De-

cember 1995. A month later, South County Coalition for Intelligent Planning filed suit. The coalition includes the Sierra Club, Watsonville Wetlands Watch, California Association for Family Farmers and *Comite de Derechos Humanos*, a Latinos civil rights group.

Changed scope of plan

The groups contend the city later "changed the scope" of its general plan by seeking to annex 600 acres west of Lee Road for development of 1,800 homes. A proposal by the Tai development company for the property was to be considered Monday night by the Planning Commission.

Yet unemployment has hovered around 20 percent, Hurst said, blaming the city's bleak economic picture for a host of social ills such as gangs, spousal abuse and teen pregnancy.

It was unclear Monday to what degree the city will have to review the annexation to satisfy the court, as a written order has not yet been issued. The environmentalists hope the city will do a full environmental impact report, an exhaustive and costly study. But Sugar said the judge did not require the city to do so. City Attorney Alan Smith said the council may only have to discuss the two annexations together at an upcoming hearing.

"I don't see it as a big setback," Smith said.