

Annexation issue divides community

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WATSONVILLE — Just outside the city limits are 600 acres of rolling hills — organic farmlands, orchards and sloughs — that will be the subject of a lively public debate Tuesday night.

In depth

The City Council is poised to approve an environmental impact report and addition of the lands, known as the Tai property, to the city's sphere of influence, the first step in annexing the land to the

city for a proposed housing development that could increase the city's housing by 10 percent.

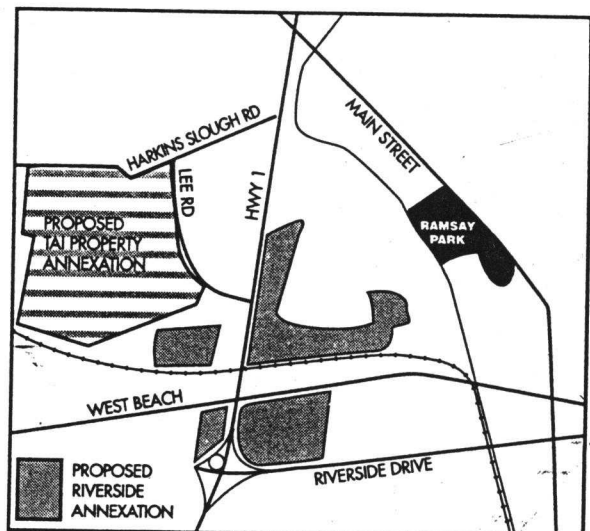
In a city where both farmland and housing are at a premium, feelings run high on both sides of the debate. Some see it as the logical answer to the city's housing crisis, which has emerged over the past two decades as the Pajaro Valley's conversion from orchards to row crops has nearly tripled the city's farmworker population and changed it from a migrant to a year-round work force.

Others see the tract as one of the county's last remnants of coastal agricultural land and freshwater

wetlands, a natural gem that should be preserved in its current state.

Even farmers are divided about the annexation, with the Farm Bureau unwilling to take a stand. Unlike the annexation of 216 acres of prime farmland near Highway 1 and Riverside Drive, which the Farm Bureau has vociferously opposed, the Tai property is not blessed with prime soil. Some would rather sacrifice the tract to housing than give up other prime farmlands the city has eyed for development on the east side of town.

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Sentinel graphic

Annexation

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Some argue, however, that its location alone — swept by sea breezes that allow year-round cultivation, and at the heart of a decades-old agricultural infrastructure — makes it a precious commodity the valley can't afford to lose.

Complicating the debate is a recent court decision by Judge Sam Stevens overturning the city's previous approval on annexing the Riverside Drive lands until it considers the impact of the two annexations together.

"Basically, we're fighting over what the soul of the Pajaro Valley is," said Councilman Todd McFarren. "Are we going to remain an agricultural community, or are we going to keep chipping it away until it's gone?"

Others argue that an essential part of an agricultural community is its workforce, and that the city has been remiss in neglecting to provide housing for those workers. Developers for the property have pledged to dedicate 50 percent of the land to affordable housing, and 80 percent of that to "very low income" housing.

That promise — 900 units of affordable housing — is a tempting carrot to those concerned about the rampant overcrowding in homes, labor camps, even garages and toolsheds around the county.

But opponents say there's no

way to hold the developers to that promise should they achieve their goal of having the land annexed.

"The whole issue is the sovereignty of the city. There are lots of promises about what you're going to do to get annexed, but once you're in the city, you can start all over," said Kirk Schmidt, former Farm Bureau president, who served on the city's housing task force several years ago. "Those promises are not binding."

But Steve Hixson, who represents developers Vincent and Gloria Tai, has publicly and privately committed to the affordable housing.

"The city doesn't want us without the 50 percent," said Hixson. "The city's got a serious problem, and we've made this commitment to them. We have no intention to change."

"I understand everyone's concern," he added. "Developers have done some funny things in the past. I think times have changed a lot in terms of what developers are trying to do."

McFarren, an opponent of the idea from the beginning, is skeptical.

"My impression is that they're going to say whatever it takes to get approval," he said. "Whether they can realistically follow through on it we'll find out later. How's a guy going to make a buck on it if it's 50 percent affordable housing?"

Hixson assures doubters that it is possible in this case, because the price of the land when the Tais acquired it was low enough to make such a development possible.

"It's marginal agricultural land," he said. "People have been trying to make money farming that land for decades, and it can't be

done."

Indeed, a history of the land includes several failed attempts by farmers to run a dairy farm and grow orchards and row crops. The current farmer, Vincent Matulich, says that low rent by the developer is the only thing that makes farming the land economically feasible. When water prices go up across the valley to pay for a proposed water management project and pipeline, he said, it will be even more difficult to farm the land.

But Sam Earnshaw, perhaps the most tireless advocate of the Tai preservation, argues that the land is far from marginal. "Just because a piece is not the best in the world does not condemn it to marginal," he told a group of Farm Bureau members at a recent luncheon. "It's not the soils that make it so productive; it's the climate and the infrastructure."

But Bill Ringe, a vocal proponent of farmland preservation, says the Tai property is the most logical farmland to sacrifice — if, indeed, the city is set on that goal.

"Where you don't want it to grow is on the most viable agricultural ground," he said. "In 50 years, someone's going to come here and see Riverside developed and they're going to see Tai preserved and they'll say, Why would you take this fertile soil — the most fertile soil in the Pajaro Valley — and develop it?"

Besides the land's value as farmland, it is home to the county's largest concentration of predatory birds and the site of the largest freshwater wetlands in the Central Coast. Some have suggested that a better use for the property would be a coastal preserve with an interpretive center.

The area is at the heart of the

Watsonville Wetlands, a network of about 800 acres that mirror what Elkhorn Slough was like before the opening of Moss Landing Harbor changed it to a saltwater estuary. The wetlands is home to a vast array of wildlife. The Tai property is bounded on the east by the west branch of Struve Slough and the Watsonville Wildlife Area, 100 acres owned by the state Fish and Game Department. On the east is Harkins Slough, the biggest of the area's sloughs. On the south is the main branch of Struve Slough, and right through the center runs Hansen Slough.

Hixson argues that developing the land can be compatible with the preservation; in fact, he said, the erosion from agriculture could cause a greater or at least equal impact to the sloughs. And his client, he says, promises a careful, environmentally sensitive development with sufficient buffers to protect the wetlands. Already, he said, they have paid for plantings of native species in wetlands areas that were once farmed.

But Jerry Busch, who has studied the wetlands for 20 years, said buffers would not be sufficient.

"The system is really unique; it has no business being developed at all," he told the planning commission last November. "You should assume if you allow urban development to go forward, you'll retain a wildlife area in form only — you won't retain the wildlife."

The Watsonville City Council will meet at 7:30 Tuesday at the City Council Chamber, 250 Main St., for its regular session. A public hearing on the court-ordered repeal of the approval of the annexation of Riverside Drive properties is scheduled, with the hearing on the Tai property to follow.