

# Group fights annexation of farmland

Watsonville - Annexation

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WATSONVILLE — A recently formed citizen coalition has filed a suit against the city of Watsonville, alleging it violated the California Environmental Quality Act.

In a brief filed Thursday in Superior Court, the South County Coalition for Intelligent Planning argued that the city has failed to perform a necessary environmental impact report on a 216-acre tract. The land, at Riverside Drive and Harkins Slough Road, is slated for annexation and rezoning for an industrial park.

Bill Parkin, an attorney representing the coalition, called the suit "a wake-up call to all these annexation proposals."

The Watsonville City Council approved a pre-zoning of the land Dec. 12 meeting. The pre-zoning must be approved by the Local Agency Formation Commission before the city can begin annexation proceedings and a more detailed planning process.

City planners estimate that the manufacturing-type businesses could draw with a modern industrial park in that area could provide up to 3,500 jobs.

Opponents argue that figure is overblown, and say the annexation could detract from the city's agricultural base. They argue that the city hasn't done enough to use vacant land and buildings already in the city limits.

But city officials say land in the city is in small tracts and doesn't allow for the kind of critical mass that attracts large employers.

The city did conduct an environmental impact report in 1993 as a part of its General Plan, and a subsequent environmental review last year that determined there was no need for a second review at this time.

Environmental impact reports are more detailed than environmental reviews and are required at each stage of a development process unless the lead agency — in this case, the city — determines that no major changes are proposed that would affect environmental quality.

Another impact report at this point, said city attorney Alan Smith, would violate the environmental act's prohibition of "repetitive and redundant" reviews. Smith said another review will be done when there is a specific plan in place.

"What we are doing is exactly what is called for by (the California Environmental Quality Act)," said city planner Charles Eadie. "If there's a development proposal, additional environmental questions will be addressed then."

The group argues that the General Plan's environmental impact report in 1993 provides little or no detail regarding the specific tract slated for annexation, and that there has been no opportunity for public comment. Parkin called the 1995 review during the pre-zoning process for annexation a "backroom environmental review."

"Really we're talking about procedure here and public disclosure," said Parkin. "We're just demanding an EIR (environmental impact review) at this stage. The coalition hasn't taken a position against the annexation at this point, though there are certain reservations about it."

Parkin called the tract "some of the best farmland around. ... It doesn't get more prime than this," he said. "Is this a proper trade-off, trading over this prime farmland? Do you really want to shoot yourself in the foot and pave that over?"

The tract is adjacent to another, larger tract, also slated for annexation, known as the Tai property. Together, the tracts comprise about 600 acres.

Eadie told the City Council last month that the tract in question amounts to about a half-percent of the Pajaro Valley's 35,000 acres of farmland.

"The petitioners have raised no issues in their complaint which were not exhaustively reviewed and discussed in the public hearing process," wrote Smith in a press release issued Friday. "The City of Watsonville believes that the lawsuit ... is based on the petitioner's misunderstanding of the facts and/or the California Environmental Quality Act and therefore lacks merit."