

LOCAL

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Annexation vote delayed

Watsonville - Annexation

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Hundreds turn out to debate Watsonville plan

By TRINA KLEIST

Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The Local Agency Formation Commission agreed Thursday to delay a final vote on Watsonville's proposed annexation of 94 acres of farmland to take more public comment.

The panel will reconvene at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Alianza Elementary School auditorium.

More than 200 people attended the LAFCO hearing, many to offer their opinions on the city's controversial bid to annex the prime farmland for industrial use. At 11:10 p.m., about 50 of the expected 85 speakers had made it to the podium.

LAFCO's nine board members must approve the city's plan to stretch its boundaries around an L-shaped tract of strawberry and lettuce fields edged roughly by Highway 1, Watsonville Slough and the industrial properties along Riverside Drive.

The city hopes to develop light industry on what is known as the Menabe-Bergstrom prop-

erty to provide an estimated 900 to 1,200 semi-skilled jobs. The property would generate \$375,000 in yearly tax income when it is fully developed, city Housing and Economic Director Janet Davison said.

It would cost the city about \$3.3 million to make the property marketable as an industrial park: land would need to be filled in, protection built against flooding, and infrastructure installed before buyers might bite.

Opponents argued those costs could undermine the city's plans to ease 15 to 20 percent unemployment. As the land sat idle and debt grew, city officials might be tempted to invite box stores and malls, permanently losing precious farmland to ugly sprawl, foes argued.

"Ninety-four acres now, 94 acres then, 94 acres again and again, Means thousands of acres of urban sprawl," Watsonville land-use activist Bernard Feldman sang to the tune of "100 Bottles of Beer" — and to the applause of many people wearing green "Save Farmland" tags.

But many others cheered and applauded

when Ana Negrete, a Watsonville High School student, spoke in Spanish of her hope for a good-paying job.

"A lot of people who oppose this project are adults," Negrete told the board members. "They already have a career. I want to be like you. ... There is a big difference between working in the field and improving myself."

Aptos resident Don Weiss warned that cookie-cutter shopping centers could turn off tourists driving along scenic Highway 1.

But Tony Luiz, the grandson of Portuguese immigrants who farmed the land, said Watsonville needs jobs. "We don't have unemployment now, but wait until the first rain.

"You people go back to Santa Cruz," he said, motioning to the people who asked that the property remain as farmland, "you have your jobs."

Ken Kimes, an organic farmer from Aptos, said the valley's cool, dry summers, mild winters and alluvial soil make it uniquely rich for agriculture.

"I could show you a world of farmers who

would want to be blessed everyday with the soil and climate we have here," Kimes said.

Luis Alejo, the grandson of Watsonville bracero workers who now attends law school, said the city is losing its youth to despair.

"I see my friends who work two minimum-wage jobs," Alejo said. "College graduates have nothing to go home to."

Watsonville's representative to LAFCO, real estate developer and county Supervisor Tony Campos, had to recuse himself from the meeting for conflicts of interest. His replacement to the board, Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, said she had reservations about whether Watsonville officials could live up to their promises about the property's future.

The property's high development costs would make it difficult for the city to compete for manufacturers against cheap, flat land in Hollister and Gilroy, Wormhoudt said. By designating the property as a redevelopment zone to attract buyers, the city would also lose tax income from those businesses, as it would need to be re-invested in the zone.

That could leave the city with a crushing debt and insufficient income to pay it off, Wormhoudt said.