

Watsonville eyes farmland to grow economy

Annexation proposal sparks concern among farmers, may fracture Measure U



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

A fieldworker adjusts irrigation pipes on the Sakata-Kett property in Watsonville on Friday morning.

Annexation
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WATSONVILLE — With jobless high and little funding to encourage economic development, city leaders are eyeing a long-coveted piece of farmland for annexation.

Councilman Daniel Dodge is pushing to explore an expansion into the 80-acre Sakata-Kett property near Highway 1 in hopes of attracting retail and reviving an economy that's yet to see much recovery from the recession.

The City Council will devote its Feb. 14 meeting to the proposal. A ballot measure could come before voters in November.

Talk of annexation has sparked concern among farmers, and an annex attempt could fracture

a decade-old compromise on city growth, known as Measure U.

Dodge says circumstances have changed since voters approved the measure setting city boundaries into the 2020s. He also wants to look at trying to overturn limits on retail on the Manabe-Ow property off Ohlone Parkway and at annexing two properties west of Highway 1 — a move that conflicts with a deal the city made to win permission for construction of Pajaro Valley High School.

"People keep asking 'What are you going to do (about the economy)?' This is an answer. You might like it. You might not like it, but it's an answer," Dodge said. "It's a vision."

HOPE FOR PROSPERITY

Dodge suggests the likes of Costco, Olive Garden and Fresh Choice

could find a home at Sakata-Kett. According to city officials, Costco has expressed interest in locating in Watsonville in the past year or so but couldn't identify an appropriate parcel.

A Costco official declined to confirm the assertion, saying it was against corporate policy to discuss specific markets.

Dodge argues retail development would bring needed jobs and tax revenue to pay for services and projects such as a third fire station. Without more revenue, the city is stuck where it is, he said. He points to Marina as a city that has improved its fortunes with a shopping center just off the highway.

"This is what working class cit-

SEE GROWTH ON A2

ANNEXATION PROPOSAL

SAKATA-KETT PROPERTY

WHAT: Watsonville considers annexing 80 acres in

strawberry production

WHY: For retail development

WHERE: Near Highway 1, between Riverside Drive and Beach Street

HOW: Requires a vote by city voters and approval of countywide board

CONFLICT: Breaks with a long-standing agreement on city growth

GROWTH

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ies are doing to rebuild their economies," he said.

Dodge also thinks a Chevron station at Riverside and Lee Road and the adjacent property, home to the historic and dilapidated Redman-Hirahara House, should be included in city limits.

This isn't the first time Watsonville has looked at Sakata-Kett, which sits between Riverside Drive and West Beach Street east of Highway 1. But in the late 1990s Watsonville lost an attempt to annex the property after a bitter battle. In the aftermath, representatives from the city, county, agriculture and environmental community forged a compromise under the auspices of Action Pajaro Valley. The result was Measure U, which set aside Manabe-Ow and acreage off Buena Vista Road and Atkinson Lane for city growth.

DEAL BREAKER

Besides concern about the potential loss of prime farmland, growers worry about the future of the Measure U deal.

Any proposal to annex Sakata-Kett "flies in the face of the point of Measure

U," said Chris Enright, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. "What was the point of all of us getting together and making an agreement if it doesn't do any good?"

Enright also said "it's premature to be looking for more land when they haven't done anything with land they already annexed."

The city has found developing Manabe-Ow challenging due to the high cost of needed infrastructure, and with the state elimination of redevelopment, it's lost a potential source of funding to help the project along.

MAKING DO

City Manager Carlos Palacios said Sakata-Kett was key to the Riverside Drive annexation plan, which also included Manabe-Ow. In comparison to Manabe-Ow, Sakata-Kett is near shovel ready, with infrastructure in place. Palacios said city leaders expected development at Sakata-Kett to help support building at Manabe-Ow. But they settled for Manabe-Ow because it was the best deal they could get after annexation was blocked, Palacios said.

The city's hands were further tied in 2006 when the Local Agency Formation Commission, the body that oversees

annexations, banned big box stores and auto centers from Manabe-Ow as a condition for annexation. Without that condition, Manabe-Ow could be more readily developed, Palacios said.

"Commercial retail development can afford to pay higher lease rates and more easily absorb infrastructure costs," he said.

Jess Brown, the farm bureau's executive director, said re-opening the discussion about growth could weaken trust that Watsonville will keep its promises, and he wonders whether it would be worthwhile.

"The question is are there businesses that would come or is this based on wishful thinking on their part," he said.

The Sakata family could not be reached to comment.

Brandon Kett, who owns 22 of the acres in question, said the proposal came "a little bit out of the blue," adding he's "not eager" to see the property developed.

"I'm a farmer," said Kett, who grows apples on Carlton Road and leases the Riverside Drive property to a strawberry grower.

"Farming is disappearing and that's really good farmland," Kett said. "But if that's the best thing for the city and the future, it's something I would consider."