

✓ *Watsonville - Annexation* Anti-annexation group takes new tack in protest

Franich proposal needs voter OK, lawyer says

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WATSONVILLE — In its latest attempt to stop the annexation of the Franich farmland, a citizens group has hired a lawyer to challenge the city's plans to build low-income housing on the property.

In the past few months, the Citizens Against Annexation has gathered 1,500 signatures, voiced its opposition at public meetings and hosted a rally to fight the city's bid to annex the 72-acre site on East Lake Avenue.

The group, made up of residents from the Bay Village and Pajaro Village retirement communities that neighbor the Franich property, charges the city's main reason for annexing the property — to build much-needed low-income housing — is invalid unless it is approved by voters.

They argue that under the state constitution's Article 34, the city first must win approval of the majority of the electorate before public money is spent on low-income housing projects.

"They feel this (annexation) is being forced upon the citizens of Watsonville without the citizens having an opportunity to voice their choice in the matter," said lawyer Perry Olsen in his Sept. 10 letter to council members.

Olsen also sent a letter to the Local Agency Formation Commission, set to vote on the Franich property before Dec. 31, asking commissioners to delay their decision until the city holds an election.

"... The property should not be annexed until the project is approved by the citizens of Watsonville at an election," said the letter.

City officials downplayed the group's latest attempt, and said it's premature to ask residents to approve a low-income housing project that doesn't yet exist.

"There's no linkage between the annexation and the (vote), which can be used to approve any future (low-income housing) projects," said City Planner Charlie Eadie. "It's irrelevant to try to do something right now. It could be five years before the Franich property is ready (for low-income housing development)."

Any low-income housing units approved now likely would be built elsewhere before the Franich property would be ready for development, Eadie said.

Eadie pointed out that the city's voting record on approving low-income housing has been good. Of seven city elections on low-income projects between 1975 and 1991, only one project was defeated. After the earthquake in 1990, 100 housing units were approved, and in 1991 residents voted to add an additional 150 units. City officials did not know how many low-income housing units remain in their allotment. If the Franich property is annexed, the city would need public approval of at least 200 units.

Mayor Oscar Rios also insisted that the group's challenge holds no weight with the annexation decision.

"They should remember that they're living on agriculture land themselves, and if people had opposed it before their homes went up, they wouldn't be living there. It's that NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude."