

Local

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Annexation

Watsonville council gets first taste of Franich annexation p.13

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The Watsonville City Council wrangled last night with the nearly decade-long effort to annex Tony Franich's 72-acre apple orchard to the city, in the process getting a primer on the whole complicated matter.

The Local Agency Formation Commission, a group made up of representatives from the county and each of the cities in the county, had wanted the city to lighten its staff workload on the annexation, saying it was still catching up from the disruption of the Oct. 17 earthquake. The council turned down the request, but did grant LAFCO some extra time.

Pat McCormick, the executive director of LAFCO, had asked the council to change the language of an agreement between LAFCO and the city so that he wouldn't have to make written analyses of the costs of sewers, roads and other infrastructure if only part of the property is annexed.

Those details are not called for by law, and they would mean a great deal of work for both city staff and himself, McCormick said. They will not change the decision in the end, which, McCormick said, will come down to a philosophical decision about residential development or preservation of farm land.

"I'm not sure how much more information the decision-makers need," McCormick said. "That will be a level of detail that won't help the city, it won't help LAFCO, and although he may disagree with me, I don't think it will help Mr. Franich, either."

Franich said the details needed to be in writing so that LAFCO would be forced to be specific.

"(The details) are what matters," Franich said last night. "An umpire can't say to a batter, 'You're out,' and if he asks whether it was a ball or a strike, say, 'I'm not going to tell you.' There have to be reasons; those are the rules of the game."

Franich said he has spent \$330,000 on his efforts to get the property annexed since 1981, including nearly \$130,000 on an Environmental Impact Report that is now in its public comment stage. He said he signed a contract with the city in good faith based on the agreement about what would be put in writing, and it wasn't fair to change that now.

The council ended up agreeing with him, voting unanimously not to change the agreement with LAFCO except by extending the deadline.

The annexation itself was not before the council. Even so, the new council got a taste of some of the bitter feelings that have grown out of debate over the issue since it began in 1981, long before most of the current council was elected.

Franich, apparently explaining why he wanted everything in writing, recounted the history of a lawsuit by an environmental group blocking the property's annexation in 1982. He blamed the former city attorney and county counsel for failing to advise that certain parts of the agreement be in writing.

Another speaker, Celia Organista, the chairwoman of LULAC's housing committee, reminded council members that the majority of them had said during their election campaigns that they were opposed to the Franich development, and they shouldn't bow to pressure now to abandon that view.

Referring to the former city manager's efforts to lobby at the state level for legislation adopting the annexation, and to the staff's recommendations on last night's agenda item, Organista said, "I can see that the Planning Department is still taking very good care of Mr. Franich."

Organista added that the council is doing a "fantastic job" getting more affordable housing in Watsonville, and that it is "proving that affordable housing can be developed without annexing our prime agricultural land."