

Tai property annexation takes a hit

Council hands back plan to developers

By BOB LINNEMAN
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Environmentalists won a victory Tuesday night when the City Council said goodbye to Tai — at least for a year. The proposed annexation of 646 acres of farmland and wetlands west of Lee Road, known as the Tai property, suffered a major setback when the council voted 4-3 to deny the project pre-zoning into the city. To move to the Local Agency Formation Commission, where an annexation bid would be made, a project must be pre-zoned by the city.

Pre-zoning is basically a declaration of the city's intentions for the land. In this case, developers sought to build housing, including "affordable" housing.

"It can't get in the door without pre-zoning," said LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick, who attended Tuesday's meeting.

Representatives of Tai Associates, which completed the purchase of the entire 646 acres just last week, were stunned by the decision. Attorneys Omar James and Steven Dixson left the meeting immediately after the vote.

"I think this is pretty preposterous," James said. "The city needs housing. ... This demonstrates a lack of foresight."

The move was a surprise, considering the City Council's stance on other annexation proposals. The Riverside Drive proposal, 219 acres of prime farmland, is now before LAFCO. It awaits a decision on whether to allow it into the city's sphere of influence, which would pave the way for an annexation request.

A majority of the council favors that proposal, which would bring an industrial park to the city and the expectation of more than 3,000 jobs.

Councilman Todd McFarren, who voted in the minority against the Riverside annexation proposal, brought the motion to deny pre-zoning for the Tai proposal, and after much debate the motion carried — a definite victory for environmental groups that have opposed the development. Council members Dennis Osmer, Oscar Rios and Betty Bobeda also voted in favor of McFarren's motion.

Tony Campos, Lowell Hurst and

Annexation set back

Continued from Page A1

Mayor Al Alcalá voted for pre-zoning the property.

Attorney James had told the council earlier that the city and Tai were committed to each other in this project, which has been in the works for seven years. "We will give you housing, affordable housing," James said. "We ask you not to vacillate on this issue. We're committed to take it to the end."

James also told the council that Tai Associates has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on environmental studies — at the city's request.

"I don't really care if Tai spent \$100,000 or \$100 million," McFar-

ren said. "That should not make a difference to us. If you're for Tai, you vote for pre-zoning. If not, you vote against."

Added Osmer: "We need to finish this thing. There's no purpose in dragging it any further. I don't have the will or the strength to go on with this stuff so let's get going."

The majority of the council agreed, denying Tai's bid.

But it's by no means over. The proposal can come back to the City Council in a year. Tai Associates can also go directly to LAFCO seeking a sphere-of-influence amendment. If granted, Tai can again go to the City Council and

ask for pre-zoning — which could be made easier with LAFCO's support already in hand.

Even if the City Council approved the pre-zoning of the 646 acres, the project faced myriad obstacles.

"There are a lot of environmental issues here," said Campos, who favored delaying a vote until LAFCO ruled on the Riverside proposal.

Without pre-zoning, the current environmental impact report may become obsolete if it should return to the council.

And it most likely will in a year. "We will continue to press on," James vowed.