

Manabe just city's first property push

Watsonville plans other expansion bids

By **DONNA JONES**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

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Watsonville Annexation

WATSONVILLE — The city's proposed expansion into 90 acres on its western edge has been viewed as a test case for a much vaunted compromise on urban growth.

As such, some see the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission's tentative approval for the Manabe-Burgstrom annexation as a positive sign for the city's long-term expansion plans. But the difficulties winning the provisional consent hint at the challenges ahead.

Nevertheless, city leaders expressed confidence Friday that not only will they get final approval for Manabe-Burgstrom, but that they'll be able to overcome obstacles on future annexation proposals as well.

In part their conviction is based on a coalition, comprised of longtime backers of growth and former opponents, that has maintained its support for the compromise of city expansion despite emerging ques-

Annex

Continued from Page A1

tions and quarrels.

"This is a very hopeful time," City Manager Carlos Palacios said. "There's been talk about unraveling (of the coalition), but clearly it's stronger than ever."

Still no one is taking anything for granted.

In 1999, LAFCO's denial of the city's plan to annex Manabe-Burgstrom sparked the founding of Action Pajaro Valley. The non-profit group brought together environmentalists, growers, housing advocates, representatives from business and labor and city leaders to forge a blueprint for growth in the city.

The result was Measure U, a 2002 voter-approved initiative that spelled out where and under what conditions the city could grow over the next 20 years.

Manabe-Burgstrom, targeted for business development, is the first of three planned annexations authorized by the measure. The others, about 400 acres north of the city in the Buena Vista Road area and 65 acres to the east near Atkinson Lane and Freedom Boulevard,

would be used primarily for housing. LAFCO must approve those annexations as well.

In recent weeks, questions emerged about how Manabe-Burgstrom would be developed. The city promised the property would be used for light industry and office space, but worries about the potential for big-box stores put the annexation in jeopardy.

A last-minute agreement between the city and property owners that would ban large retail stores secured the tentative approval.

The other two annexation proposals, still a long way from coming to LAFCO, also face tough questions. Quarrels have emerged over housing numbers, water supplies and future school sites.

"We are going to hit bumps in the road," acknowledged Lisa Dobbins, executive director of Action Pajaro Valley.

But she added the organization will help the various groups resolve disputes.

John Doughty, the city's community development director, said no one would argue that the Buena Vista and Atkinson Lane annexations will be easy. For one thing, some Buena Vista residents, concerned about losing the rural

character of their neighborhoods, oppose annexation.

But the support for Manabe-Burgstrom demonstrated the city's commitment and ability to work out differences, Doughty said.

The strength of that support at Wednesday's LAFCO hearing impressed commissioners. Of the 45 people who spoke during the hearing Wednesday, only one expressed opposition.

County Supervisor Jan Beautz, who serves on LAFCO, called that unusual at any hearing, but it was particularly notable since opposition was so strong in 1999.

"It really shows they worked very hard to reach that kind of consensus," Beautz said. "It's a difficult thing to do so they've accomplished a lot."

Still, city leaders and others recognize the job is far from done.

Friday morning several key players gathered at Action Pajaro Valley's downtown office for a regular committee meeting and discussed strategy for ensuring Manabe-Burgstrom gets final approval when LAFCO meets Dec. 7.

One idea is to try to persuade the Sierra Club, the only group to express opposition to the annexation at Wednesday's meeting, to change its stance, or at least stay neutral.

"The work is not over yet," said Dana Sales, chairman of the Action Pajaro Valley committee. "We're at the beginning of a long process."

Contact Donna Jones at
djones@santacruzsentinel.com.