

Watsonville advances annexation

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annexation

WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville City Council paved the way for a new industrial park Tuesday, with a 5-1 vote to annex 216 acres of farmland near the intersection of Riverside Road and Highway 1.

The council voted to send an application to the Local Agency Formation Commission, which has final say over the annexation. In addition, the Coastal Commission has jurisdiction over the parcels west of Highway 1.

"I just hope that when we proceed with the whole 216 acres, that we aren't condemning it to Franich Annexation hell," commented Councilman Dennis Osmer, the sole opponent in Tuesday's vote. Councilman

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Tony Campos abstained, while the remainder of the council voted to favor the proposal.

In July, Osmer proposed to annex just one of the parcels included in the proposal — the Menabe property, which lies to the north of West Beach Street and to the east of the freeway. He reasoned that it would be easier to gain LAFCO's approval if the city went before the agency with a smaller parcel, and had a comprehensive plan for its development.

Councilman Todd McFarren, who had opposed the annexation until Tuesday night, suggested in July that the city build playing fields on part of the land. That suggestion was included in the proposal.

He also proposed that the city sacrifice the future

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Farmland annexation

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annexation of the Tai property as a tradeoff, to lessen community opposition to the Riverside annexation. That proposal was abandoned because, as city staff pointed out, the property has a separate owner, a separate proposed use and a separate process.

"It's pretty clear that the majority of the council is voting for the full 216 acres," said McFarren, who withdrew his opposition Tuesday. "I'm satisfied the intent is to get some parks and wetlands out there."

City staff has proposed using some of the land for a restoration project for the Watsonville Slough, which is currently little more than a drainage ditch running through the property. Such a project could provide some flood protection as well as wildlife habitat.

None of the project's opponents spoke at the afternoon discussion, which took place shortly after 4 p.m.

Councilman Oscar Rios reassured the audience that the city does not intend to annex more farmland in the future.

"There's a perception out there that Watsonville is going wild — that we want to pave over all the farmland," Rios said. "We have 35,000 acres in (agricultural) production now in the valley; this is less than 1 percent we're trying to annex. People say, 'If you annex this, what is next?' I want to see a greenbelt buffer, an area we will not move beyond."

The council's resolution calls for city staff to apply to LAFCO for annexation of the 216 acres; to amend the city's sphere of influence to include all properties proposed for annexation in the city's General Plan; and that the city staff move to incorporate wetlands restoration on the property and consider it for potential park development.