

✓ Watsonville Annexation

Watsonville readies land for annexation

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WATSONVILLE — It's round two of the Tai property annexation debate, and so far, the pro-development forces are in the lead.

The developers of the 656-acre tract west of Lee Road were back at the table Monday night, asking the Planning Commission to approve a request to prezone the land for residential development. The pre zoning is a necessary step before the city annexes the land, which has been proposed for an 1,800-unit housing development.

The Planning Commission obliged, in a 5-1 vote. Commissioner Pedro Castillo was the sole opponent. The proposal will come before the City Council for pre zoning in late June or early July — but not a request to annex the property, said city development chief Charlie Eadie.

In March, the council voted 7-0 not to proceed with the Tai annexation, reasoning that it was better to resolve a separate annexation first — the 216 acres of prime farmland off Riverside Drive that are slated to become an industrial park.

At that time, the council also approved the environmental impact report for the Tai property, a decision that is now being contested in court by environmentalists and farmers. But council members decided to hold off on the annexation, reasoning that it was better to put its eggs in the Riverside basket. By so doing, council members hoped to send a message to the Local Agency Formation Commission that it was prioritizing the jobs it could create at the industrial park.

Nevertheless, Tai developers opted to go forward with their development proposal, reasoning that if they wait, they could run into legal

problems down the road similar to those encountered by developers of the Riverside parcels. In that case, opponents of the development argued that too much time had lapsed between the city's approval of the Riverside pre zoning and the environmental review that was conducted a year and a half earlier.

The developers have spent between \$70,000 and \$100,000 in arguing their case before the city, said their attorney, Omar James. If the commission were to refuse to allow the pre zoning to move forward, James argued, the environmental report would become "stale, untimely" and the developer would be forced to spend more money on another environmental impact report, resulting in the "death throes" of the development.

Development will occur west of Highway 1 regardless of what the city decides on the Tai development, he said; the Pajaro Valley school district is proceeding with plans to build a high school across the road from the tract. The development would go a long way toward helping the city reach its goal of 5,000 new housing units by 2005. Without annexation of new land, he argued, the city has no hope of meeting that goal.

"We've done our part, and we will continue to," James said. "We just ask that you assist us in the process so it doesn't become more expensive and time-consuming than it already has."

But a lineup of opponents also addressed the commission.

"We know, in your far-reaching wisdom, you will do the very best you can to develop ways to stimulate the economy, create jobs, build housing and, at the same time, save our very valuable, our sacrosanct agricultural land and wetlands for future generations of all species," said

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Cyndi Van Tassel, reading from a letter by the Environmental Council of Santa Cruz County. Van Tassel, a member of the Environmental Council's board, is a teacher in the Pajaro Valley school district.

"We see you as having the potential to create a new paradigm, a new model for the nation," Van Tassel said. "We urge you to make the most of this creative opportunity and to set a precedent for sustainable economic growth and development for the rest of the nation."

Commissioner Ana Ventura Phares saw it differently.

Development opponents who advise the city to build more houses inside the city limits ought to come take a walk around the neighborhoods, she suggested. Watsonville is already by far the densest city in the county, with 5,271 people per square mile, as compared to 3,687 in Santa Cruz.

"You say you want to protect the sanctity of life; I include people in that environment," said Ventura Phares. "You can't say nature is sacrosanct and say nature is something less."

Marian Martinez of Watsonville Wetlands Watch warned that the development, which would probably be at least 50 percent upscale homes, will not meet the needs of the farm workers who are now crowding into garages and cramped housing. She was also skeptical that the 900 units planned for low-income people will ever be built; that land will be set aside for housing by the developer, but another organization must build them.

"Our needs are not for people with \$60,000 incomes," she said. "We need housing for itinerant farmers with lots of children, near the downtown area. That's where we need to provide housing."