

Battle looms tonight over Watsonville farmland

Watsonville - Annexation

BY TERRI MORGAN
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A controversial land-use project that would pave the way for annexing 646 acres of agricultural land comes before the Watsonville City Council tonight, raising the ire of farm preservationists and others who fear it is one of many projects that will threaten wetlands.

The council will consider rezoning the parcel known as the Tai property for residential use and open space following a pub-

lic hearing on the matter.

Located between Highway 1 and the Monterey Bay, the Tai property is made up of 17 parcels west of Lee Road. Bounded to the north by Harkins Slough Road, it includes 342 acres now used for farming activities. The applicant, Tai Associates Inc., wants to have the land rezoned from commercial agricultural to multiple residential and open space.

But opponents say this is only the beginning.

The Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission is considering an application to place the Tai property and several other parcels, including 216 acres near Riverside Drive, under the city's sphere of influence. The pre-zoning change is opposed by farmland preservationists and others, including Bill Parkin, an attorney representing a coalition of seven organizations that filed a lawsuit challenging the adequacy of environmental documents for the Tai project. Opponents argue

the city needs to consider the cumulative impact of adjacent projects.

"The Tai property is directly north of the Riverside Drive site, and it's all part of a larger picture," Parkin said. "You can't look at those properties individually."

But Omar James, an attorney for Tai Associates, said the redesignation will allow his clients to help fill the city's need for housing.

"In 1994, there was an immedi-

ate need for 2,400 homes in Watsonville," James said. "According to the general plan, by 2005 there will be a need for 4,500 homes."

James said Monday that Tai Associates had initially planned to seek permission to build 1,800 housing units on the land now used for row crops and orchards as called for in the Watsonville general plan.

The remainder of the property, including 252 acres of freshwater marshes and oak trees and 52 acres of hills, would be designat-

ed as open space. Non-developable areas also would include buffers and setbacks from riparian and wetland areas and habitat corridors.

Parkin also argues that any development on the site will adversely affect the adjacent wetlands and environmentally sensitive areas.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Watsonville City Council will meet today at 7:30 p.m. in the council chambers, 250 Main St.

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