

Watsonville gains 1,300 acres for potential city annexation

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CAPITOLA — The city of Watsonville gained 1,300 acres for potential annexation Wednesday when the Local Agency Formation Commission adopted a 4,950-acre sphere of influence for the city.

The commission's decision came here on a 3-2 vote with Commissioners Robley Levy and Joe Cucchiara opposing because of the lack of an environmental impact report.

Voting for the measure were Chairman Michael Routh and Commissioners Bill Johnston and Stanley Nielsen. Johnston is mayor of Watsonville.

The sphere of influence shows the present boundaries of the 3,650-acre city and 1,300 acres the city could annex between now and 1990.

Having a sphere of influence has become acutely important since a district Court of Appeal ruled Monday that local

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governments must have approved spheres of influence maps before any annexations can be made.

Due to the lack of an environmental impact report, Watsonville's sphere of influence may face a challenge in court by the Resource Defense Fund.

Commission Executive Director Pat McCormick said Tom Brown, attorney for the local environmental group, threatened such a lawsuit during the hearing Wednesday.

The Resource Defense Fund was the group that took to the Court of Appeal the question of annexations without spheres of influence.

Environmentalists are upset with the sphere of influence despite a safeguard built into it by the commission to protect agricultural lands from rampant development, McCormick said.

Commissioners adopted a policy stating that prior to permitting the annexation of undeveloped agricultural lands to the city, the commission shall make findings that there are no lands in the city that could be developed for similar purposes.

This is stronger wording than what McCormick suggested. He recommended the commission adopt a policy stating the city and the commission should encourage the development of lands inside the city before allowing the annexation.

The commission's strongly-worded policy was approved on a 3-2 vote, with Commissioners Nielsen and Johnston opposed.

In adopting the 4,950-acre area, commissioners went along with McCormick's recommendation for a sphere of influence smaller than what originally was contemplated.

More than a year ago, commissioners tentatively adopted a 6,819-acre sphere. But when it appeared this would need an environmental impact report, city officials came back with a proposal for a 5,070-acre sphere of influence.

By removing environmentally-sensitive areas from Watsonville's proposal, McCormick believes the 4,950-acre sphere of influence doesn't require an environmental impact report.

City officials agreed with McCormick's suggestion to remove the agricultural areas between the Franich property (adjacent to East Lake shopping center) and Salsipuedes Creek and the St. Francis Academy on East Lake Avenue.

There are 80 acres of agricultural land still within the adopted sphere of influence and outside the city limits. Approximately 30 of these acres have been designated as marginal or transitional farmlands by the county, according to McCormick.

The remaining 50 acres, McCormick said, aren't reason enough in his opinion for a full environmental impact report. They will be protected, he said, by the commission's policy on development of agricultural lands.

The 4,950-acre sphere of influence contains the 74-acre Franich property, an old apple orchard recently annexed to the city.

McCormick said he didn't include this site in his calculations of agricultural land because even though the annexation is the subject of a suit by the Resource Defense Fund, the commission considers the land part of the city.

Potentially, 358 housing units could be built on the old apple orchard lands.