

Land plan nixed

Watsonville - Annexation

■ LAFCO rejects proposal for Watsonville annexation.

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Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The city lost its bid to annex 94 acres of prime farm land for an industrial park Tuesday night.

After hearing from about 30 speakers for and against the annexation, the Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) denied Watsonville's proposal by a 4-3 vote.

Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt, who made the motion to deny the proposal, said she did not believe the annexation would produce the jobs and housing the city said it would.

She challenged the city to point to a community where the loss of agricultural lands has improved the lives of the poor.

Citing a long list of doubts and reservations that the proposal would benefit Watsonville, commissioners against the annexation said the city did not prove that the use of the land warranted the loss of prime agricultural land.

Known as the Manabe-Burgstrom property, the land is located just east of Highway 1 behind Big Creek Lumber north of Riverside Road.

"I'm incredibly disappointed," said a dejected Watsonville City Manager Carlos Palacios after the hearing. "If this land can't be annexed I don't know what land can



Wormhoudt

LAFCO commissioner made proposal to deny annexation of farmland.

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... I don't know where we go from here."

Palacios said the commission did not grasp the reality of Watsonville's need to provide jobs and housing.

"I think there is a lack of understanding of what is happening here in Watsonville," he said. "We can't have jobs and housing without land."

While agriculture made Watsonville what it is today, the industry has also been a burden on the city, Palacios said. Since most of the farmland is outside the city limits, Watsonville does not receive any tax benefits from the industry. What it does get is demand for low-income housing, services and education for Spanish-speaking children. In spite of the jobs agriculture creates, unemployment in Watsonville stands at about 18 percent, although this figure varies seasonally.

The city planned to use the land for light industrial uses for the land such as computer assembly plants, bakeries, food packing, and wholesaling. The industrial park was pro-

jected to provide 900-1,200 jobs.

Watsonville City Councilman Ramon Gomez shared Palacios' frustration.

"I was surprised because we did everything they asked for," he said, adding that he was "insulted" by the commission's lack of faith in the city's ability to manage its own growth.

The city entered into an agreement with the California Coastal Commission and the county over future development west of Highway 1 in hopes of winning approval of the project. But now that the commission shot down the proposal, the agreement will probably be thrown out, Gomez said.

Tuesday's hearing was a continuation of a meeting Thursday where commissioners heard from more than 50 speakers before adjourning.

At Tuesday's hearing, the majority of speakers spoke against the annexation.

"The land is suitable for farming, not for building," said Marian Martinez, chairwoman of the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley Farmlands and Wetlands, one of several environmental and agriculture groups against the annexation.

"(Annexation) won't be answering the need of our youth for employment," she said.

While many speakers and LAFCO commissioners doubted Watsonville could make good on its promises to bring in industrial jobs, Commissioner Roger Anderson wanted to give the city the benefit of the doubt and voted in favor of the proposal.

"Can the city do it," he asked. "And who is in the position to say they can or cannot. I think this is one chance Watsonville should have."

The commission's vote went against the recommendation of LAFCO Executive Officer Pat McCormick.

In his staff report to the LAFCO commission, McCormick recommended approval of the annexation because vacant industrial land is scarce but he added two "reservations."

Based on projected development costs, he said the development potential of the site is "ambiguous." Second, McCormick said little progress has been made to address some of the fundamental land use policy differences between the city, the county and the California Coastal Commission.

"I think given the chance we would have succeeded," Palacios said. "But we're not being given the chance."