Annexation miffs Patton, Cucchiara

The annexation of 74 acres of farmland into the city of Watsonville is the beginning of the end to agriculture in the county, Supervisors Gary Patton and Joe Cucchiara warned Wednesday.

This warning came as the Local Agency Formation Commission approved the annexation of the Franich apple orchard located to the east of the present city limits and just north of the East Lake Village Shopping Center.

Patton, a member of the commission, and Cucchiara, an alternate member, were the only two on the five-member commission to vote against the annexation. Voting for the proposal were Scotts Valley Councilman Rod Pulley, Capitola Councilman Michael Routh and Commission Chairman Stan Nielsen.

Members of the Sierra Club, Resource Defense Fund and the Environmental Council of Santa Cruz County also protested the annexation.

Attorney Anthony Franich, owner of the land, said he has no immediate plans to replace the apple trees with homes. The land has the potential for 358 dwelling units, according to the environmental impact report don on the annexation proposal.

As the commission readied to vote, Patton stated, "We have been trying to remain a county where agriculture is our sustaining force . . . . We are casting this aside and casting our lot with the electronics industry that destroyed the Santa Clara Valley."

Patton referred to remarks by Nielsen as proof that this is just the beginning of future annexations of farmland into the city for the purpose of development.

Nielsen had stated earlier in the meeting that in order to provide for orderly growth, it was necessary for the whole area from East Lake out to the Interlaken residential area off Holihan Road to eventually come into the city.

Patton charged that this remark indicates that this is not a small annexation, "but the beginning of the destruction of the entire agricultural area out ot the Interlaken area . . . "

Commission Executive Director Pat McCormick also pointed out in a report to commissioners that the annexation could open the way for development of agricultural lands to the north and east.

McCormick recommended a partial annexation of 19 acres, but an attempt by Cucchiara to adopt this recommendation failed in a 2-3 vote with Pulley, Nielsen and Routh against.

Cucchiara put out a warning to farmers in stating, "If I were a farmer, I'd look long and hard at this decision . . . because this action . . . represents a difficult future for agriculture to survive before this body in any future actions."

But it was one of the major farmers in the Pajaro Valley, J.J. Crosetti, who argued in front of the commission for the annexation.

"There's good, prime agricultural land in the Pajaro Valley, some of the best in the world, but it's not out in the Franich area."

Both Crosetti and Franich claimed that the soil on the 74 acres was not good enough for row crops and that it's no longer economical to market apples from the orchard due to competition from other apple-growing areas.

Franich also cited problems with poor drainage and said it wouldn't be economically feasible for him to put in an elaborate drainage system to continue farming the land.

The property owner also pointed out that up until last year when supervisors moved the urban services line the land always has been designated for development and even was included in the Salsipuedes Sanitary Sewer District.

These arguments appeared to convince Routh, who stated, "I find those economic and social factors that surround this land . . . weigh heavily against that prime (agricultural) designation."

"I personally dispute the fact that it is prime agricultural land and due to other things such as its inclusion in the Salsipuedes Sanitary Sewer District and the drainage problems, I have to go along with the applicant in this case."

While Cucchiara and Patton argued that the annexation goes against commission policy of protecting prime agricultural land from development, Pulley pointed out that the policy calls for such protection unless it gets in the way of planned, orderly growth of an area.