

Council moves ahead on Freedom annexation

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — The City Council last night directed city staff to move forward on a proposal to annex Freedom Elementary School and the area immediately surrounding the school.

Under the proposed annexation, Freedom School and the Green Valley Mobile Home Park would become part of Watsonville. City staff was directed to lay the groundwork for pre-zoning the area and preparing an environmental review. The city is to prepare an annexation application on behalf of the school and mobile home park residents.

The area is now under the jurisdiction of the county, which provides law enforcement and public works services. School officials and area residents have complained about slow police response time. The county Sheriff's Office patrols the area. The Pajaro Valley school

Experience in flood's wake revives talk of Pajaro becoming part of city

district had requested the city to annex the school more than a year ago.

Local Area Formation Commission representatives has recommended that the level of support for annexation be measured among residents in the affected area. School officials, parents, and residents held several meetings on the subject, conducted telephone surveys and canvassed the area to discuss the matter.

More than 200 residents signed a petition in support of annexation. Only 30 were opposed.

Annexing Freedom School would also mean the city would take over the county library branch that is housed on the school property. The city already

gets a portion of its library money from the county for serving residents living in unincorporated sections of the county surrounding Watsonville.

City staffers believe it could be more than a year before the annexation could take place.

Annexation was on the council's mind last night, or at least on the mind of Councilman Dennis Osmer.

Osmer said the city should "extend the hand" to Pajaro residents who are interested in becoming part of Watsonville. The idea is not new, but the flooding took the idea off the shelf, again.

The city of Watsonville took an immediate role and became deeply

involved in helping the flood victims in Pajaro. City staff set up a command center on the foot of the Pajaro bridge and helped organize a multitude of emergency services.

Monterey County officials took much longer to respond. The county had several areas devastated by flood waters, including Salinas, Monterey, Castroville, and Carmel. Many major roads were washed out, making it difficult or impossible for Monterey County emergency help to get to Pajaro, which is in extreme northern section of the county.

Still, many Pajaro residents were angry that it took so long for help to arrive from Monterey County. At last night's City Council meeting, several Pajaro residents, most of them Spanish speakers, thanked the city for their help.

Osmer said he wants the citizens of Pajaro to explore the possibility of becoming part of Watsonville. The decision is in the hands of Pajaro residents, Osmer said, adding that he doesn't want anyone to think the city is forcing the idea on them.

"(Pajaro residents) need to take the lead," Osmer said.

The people of Pajaro and people of Watsonville are all "one community," Osmer said. The flood confirmed that point.

Pajaro and Watsonville may be one community in heart and spirit, but under state law, they are two separate entities and it would take an act of the state Legislature to marry the two.

Pat McCormick, executive director of the Local Area Formation Commission, said state laws prohibit annexations across county lines. The law would have to be changed by the Legislature before Watsonville could annex Pajaro.

In the past 15 years or so, only two efforts have been mounted in the Legislature to change the law, McCormick said. Both have failed.

Logistically, it would be relatively easy to join the two cities and run them as one, McCormick said. Water and fire districts often form across county lines and usually run smoothly on an administrative level. But the political front presents another problem entirely. A squabble can easily erupt over "turf," he said.

There are 10 cities in the state with geographical configurations similar to Watsonville and Pajaro. It would take a concerted effort to change state law, McCormick said.

While it's not impossible to change the law, the odds run against it.

"It's a lot easier to maintain the status quo than to get a change through the Legislature," McCormick said.

The Pajaro-Watsonville annexation may be put on the Council's agenda for its next meeting, scheduled for Tuesday.

REFERENCE