

# Farmland annexation set back

Walt Sonville - Annexation  
Environmental review insufficient, judge says

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SANTA CRUZ — Superior Court Judge Sam Stevens has once again sent the city of Watsonville back to the drawing board.

The city has been trying to annex 216 acres of prime farmland that straddles Highway 1 near Riverside Drive to build an industrial park. Watsonville has pinned much of its hope for job development on the annexation. More land is needed, city officials say, particularly with the advent of the city's new Enterprise Zone status, which will allow Watsonville to attract major new manufacturers through a variety of tax incentives.

## ■ Enterprise zone — A4

But in a brief decision issued Friday, Stevens dampened hopes for quick progress. He concluded that the city has not conducted an "initial study" of the environmental impacts of the annexation.

Councilman Dennis Osmer saw the ruling as a clear sign the city must work with annexation opponents to hash out a mutually acceptable plan for economic development.

After the decision was announced Monday, he made a plea for collaboration.

"We run into a brick wall, get a bloody nose, take three steps back and run into another one," said Osmer. "We're going to bleed to death before we get anything done."

Regardless of whether annexation opponents are correct in their arguments, they must be included in the solution, he said, or the city will be locked in perpetual combat.

"These people filing suits have very real power and very real ideas," he said. "We need to collaborate with them instead of kicking them in the shins. Hopefully we'll put the righteousness aside and move toward achieving what we want."

Bill Parkin, the attorney who represents preservationists in a variety of lawsuits against the city, hinted that a compromise might be possible.

"Let's draw the line at Highway 1 and then let's talk about the rest," said Parkin. "That's the first step. Everything west of Highway 1 is non-negotiable. Then let's look at the rest and develop a plan that will meet the needs."

Osmer took issue with Councilman Lowell Hurst's assertion that the city must communicate the dire

Please see FARMLAND — BACK PAGE

A-8 — Tuesday, May 20, 1997 — Sentinel

## Farmland development

Continued from Page A1

economic need in the area to bring its opponents around. With unemployment rates hovering around 20 percent, and with welfare reform looming on the horizon, job development is the city's No. 1 priority.

But Osmer said that communicating economic need doesn't seem to be having an impact.

"We have dumped truckloads of economic need" on county officials who still oppose the annexation, as evidenced by the Local Agency Formation Commission's rejection of a 14-acre annexation bid last week, Osmer said. "Maybe it's about having an acceptable plan for addressing that need. Maybe I'm wrong, but this way just isn't working."

Attorney Parkin called Stevens' decision a major victory.

"They're going to have to rescind the ordinance and go back to square one again," said Parkin. "If they decide to go through with this project, they'll have to reopen the public hearing and complete the environmental review. Why doesn't the city just come clean and admit to the public ... that they're paving over prime farmland, and that there is a cumulative impact?"

City attorney Alan Smith said Monday that Stevens'

intentions for the city are unclear, and that the city will compile a list of questions for the judge to clarify its next steps.

Smith said he was puzzled by the judge's terse statement.

"I don't know what his position is," Smith said. "As I understand it, he believes the substance of our review is adequate. Before, he said everything is OK except for the cumulative effect (of the all the city's proposed annexations) on ag land. Now he's saying what we've done is not an environmental review."

Before beginning the Riverside Drive annexation, the city hired a consultant to go over the environmental review of the plan that was included in the city's General Plan environmental review. The consultant produced a 24-page report at that time, which the city says should function as an initial study. But Parkin says that report was not open to public review until the annexation process began, and that an initial study should be open from the very beginning.

Smith was optimistic, however. "We're heartened by the fact that he's saying there's no problem with the substance of our review," Smith said. "I'm just not sure what he wants from us."

Smith said he plans to submit the city's questions to Stevens early next week.