

County battens down for fight on Watsonville annex

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SANTA CRUZ — A development group's plan to annex 20 acres of prime and not-so-prime agricultural land to the city of Watsonville is raising hackles at the County Center.

The annexation proposal is still a long way from being heard by the county's Local Agency Formation Commission, which must ultimately

decide its fate, but county planners are already marshaling arguments against it, and Board of Supervisors Chairman Gary Patton, who sits on the commission, has indicated he'll oppose it.

The developers, Village Associates, want to build 192 condominiums and 33 single-family homes on a site located between the city's northeasterly boundary and Salsipuedes Creek.

The parcel is in a flood plain and currently ineligible for subdivision under the county's flood plain and agricultural protection policies, according to the county Planning Department.

All of the acreage qualifies as prime agricultural land, although about half has not been suitable for farming because the topsoil was scraped off of it a number of years ago.

The topsoil was used as fill dirt for a residential project.

Row crops are being grown on the parcel's 10 unmolested acres, with lettuce the principal crop.

According to an environmental impact report on the project, "The small amount of quality agricultural land ... and the site's proximity to existing urbanized areas makes the parcel much less desirable for agricultural use."

That, however, is not the view of county planners.

They've taken issue with the environmental impact report in a letter to the city, contending that the report understates "the impacts of converting this parcel to non-agricultural use."

According to planners, the report's assertion that development of the property would not involve a significant loss of farmland "is based not on the inherent characteristics of the land but on the fact that a portion of the (topsoil) was removed from the site."

County planners fault the report for failing to consider "possibilities for restoring this resource."

Noting that fill dirt would have to

be "imported to the site to raise residential development above the flood level," planners wonder "why high-quality fill (can't) be imported" to make farming of the entire parcel profitable once more.

And they warn that development of the property will "forever foreclose" its restoration to "full agricultural use."

County planners are also sharply critical of the environmental report for what they say is its failure to adequately consider "how development of this parcel would put pressure on other adjacent agricultural parcels to convert to residential use."

Asked about the proposed annexation Thursday, Board Chairman Patton said: "My general position is that agricultural land should not be annexed to cities.

"The burden of proof is clearly on anybody who wants to turn agricultural land into subdivisions," he said.

Under state law, the county's Local Agency Formation Commission must reject annexations involving development of prime agricultural land, unless it finds that "such an action would not promote

the planned orderly, efficient development of an area."

And under a resolution defining Watsonville's "sphere of influence," the commission is not to approve the "annexation of undeveloped lands in agricultural areas" to the city unless it finds "that there are, no lands inside the city which are capable of development for the same purposes for which the annexation is sought."

The annexation proposal will likely go to the commission sometime later this year, after the environmental report has been reviewed by the Watsonville City Council.

The battle lines being drawn between the county and the city over the Village Associates annexation plan are similar to those drawn more than four years ago for another proposal by the city to annex a nearby 72-acre apple orchard.

Approved by the Local Agency Formation Commission, that annexation was later challenged in court by the Resource Defense Fund. The environmental group lost its case in Superior Court, but appealed the decision, by Judge Harry Brauer, to the State Court of Appeals. The group's appeal is still pending.