

Local news

Watsonville lobbying hard for annexations

By **BOB LINNEMAN**
Sentinel staff writer

APTOS — Watsonville Mayor Al Alcalá stood before a gathering of the Santa Cruz County Business Council on Friday morning, working to convince his audience of the merits of a proposed city annexation of 216 acres of prime farmland at Riverside Drive and Highway 1.

"We're a city in crisis," he told the gathering of business and community leaders. "... We need your support."

In the back of the banquet room at the Aptos Seascape Golf Course, a radio somehow turned on and the song "I can see clearly now, the rain is gone" filled the air. It seemed appropriate as Alcalá pleaded for his city's future and for the board of the Local Agency Formation Commission to "clearly"

see his point of view.

LAFCO will decide the fate of not just the Riverside annexation, but a series of other annexation proposals the city hopes will create revenue and jobs and boost the city's overall quality of life.

"I'm glad to say LAFCO is warming up," Alcalá said, laying the groundwork for what he hopes will be a favorable vote. "I hope after this meeting, they'll heat up and give us the right decision."

But to those in the opposite camp, LAFCO is all that stands between the Pajaro Valley and the erosion of its viability as an agricultural center.

"The history of urban destruction of prime farmland is being written on the coastal soils of California," said Sam Earnshaw, a farmer and the leading voice opposing the annexation. "Taking farmland to solve jobs and housing

needs is old-fashioned, frontier mentality that will put Watsonville in the history books on the same page with Los Angeles and San Jose."

It's not just any farmland that the city wants to press into industrial service, argued Kirk Schmidt of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, but a portion of the most productive farmland in the world: the 2,000-odd acres of coastal alluvial soil in the Pajaro River Valley.

And while the city envisions an industrial park right now, it could easily change its mind and rezone the property for commercial, bringing in sales-tax rich box stores that would provide the city with revenues but give the community low-wage, no-benefit jobs, Schmidt said.

"The consequences of this type of development will be that what we'll call Old Main Street will be

lined with discount malls and an El Grande at the Gottschalks department store."

Three LAFCO commissioners were in attendance Friday: chairman Roger Anderson, county supervisor for the south county area Ray Belgard and environmentalist Jim Van Houten. They and the other four commissioners will literally be deciding the fate of the city's future, Alcalá said.

A public hearing on the issue scheduled for Sept. 3 at Lakeview Middle School promises to be emotional and heated on both sides.

Once Alcalá and members of the city's staff completed their presentation to the Business Council, a panel representing viewpoints on both sides argued their cases.

The city pleaded for the creation of jobs and revenue. Agriculture pleaded for the preservation of prime farmland — a fast diminish-

ing commodity, they said.

The Business Council itself has no authority in the matter, but its support does carry some political clout. Two-thirds of the 65-member council must vote in favor of the annexation proposal to garner a recommendation — which would then be forwarded to LAFCO.

The two-year-old Business Council has voted only once to make a recommendation, and that was in favor of Measure A, the county parks measure — which was defeated by Santa Cruz County voters in June.

Diane Porter-Cooley, the grande dame of Pajaro Valley politics, sat back and shook her head at the proceedings. She had sharp words for a perceived lack of vision on the part of city officials.

"They are very limited in their scope," she said. "There's a lot of industrial and residential land in

Pajaro; all those packing sheds are sitting vacant."

Watsonville is the "county seat" of the Pajaro Valley, which extends as far south as Moss Landing and includes Aromas and Las Lomas, and as far north as the southern reaches of Aptos. The school district and water district treat the area as one unit and plan cooperatively for its residents; why should the same regional approach not be applied to housing and jobs, she argued.

"Pajaro is being destroyed by politics; Watsonville needs to reach across the river and cooperatively plan for the future," she said.

LAFCO chairman Anderson said much of the information presented Friday he'd heard before.

Sentinel staff writer Tracy Barnett contributed to this report.