

# Payoffs alleged at LAFCO hearing

Attendee carried  
voucher worth \$15

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WATSONVILLE — Supporters and opponents of the Riverside annexation came in large numbers to the Local Agency Formation Commission public hearing last Wednesday night at Lakeview Middle School.

But some attendees may have had other motives.

Some members of the community were offered cash and vouchers for their attendance to the hearing.

This reporter was approached at

the meeting by a man with a ticket.

The ticket, printed on bright blue stock paper, said in Spanish that the coupon was valued at \$15. Underneath, it advertised the LAFCO hearing, said Alfredo Escalon, a member of an environmental group in opposition to the proposal.

Escalon said he was approached by the same man at the hearing who had the coupon and was looking to exchange it for cash.

Escalon said the man told him in Spanish that he received the coupon downtown. He added that the man did not speak English and was hesitant to speak for any length of time, but wanted to "find where he could

See PAYOFFS, page 3

## PAYOFFS

From page 1

get his money."

According to Watsonville Latino activist Elias Alonzo, some members of the community did receive coupon vouchers for their attendance — he said the vouchers were sponsored by Latino support groups in Watsonville.

Alonzo, vice president of Main Street Watsonville, Inc. and supporter of the annexation, said the coupons served as item vouchers and others were exchanged for cash, which he said was used to pay gas expenses for travel.

He would not comment on how many people received the coupons

or who, specifically, issued them to the community. Though he did confirm that some community members did receive cash, he declined to say how much cash was actually distributed.

After Alonzo made a statement in support of the proposal at the LAFCO hearing, approximately 50 Latinos carrying flags and banners indicating support for the annexation followed him out of the gymnasium. Some of their banners said "Viva Watsonville" and "LAFCO Stay North."

"These are people who have no money for food or transportation,"

Alonzo said. "Some people were given cash to defray the cost of gasoline." He added that the location of the meeting made it difficult for members of the Latino community to attend.

Escalon said he felt the coupons were used as a tactic to get high attendance of support for the annexation at the hearing, despite whether attendees were aware of the reason for being there. "It kind of leads me to believe that they had no idea what was going on," he said.

Alonzo maintained that a Latino presence was needed at the hear-

ing, and that the concept of distributing coupons to community members has been contorted by opponents as an "insidious thing."

"It's one of those same old malicious contortions of the facts," he said.

LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick said he was not aware of any attempts to increase the attendance of the hearing and said he did not know where funds to pro-claim support or opposition came from. "I think it is ill-advised for people to be paid to participate in the democratic process," McCormick said.