

Watsonville considers annexing farm land

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WATSONVILLE — An economic analysis of the plan to annex 216 acres of prime farmland and put it to commercial and industrial use echoed city predictions that the proposal would bring some 3,000 new jobs to the city, compared to the 70 farmworkers who could be employed on the land if it remains in its agricultural state.

The Watsonville City Council is expected to vote Tuesday on the pre-zoning of the land as industrial and commercial, the last step before applying to the Local Agency Formation Commission for approval to annex the land.

The report, released by the city on Thursday, estimated the number of new jobs and revenues that could be reaped from the land along Riverside Road and Highway 1 if it were developed according to city plans, as opposed to leaving it as farmland. Annual revenues from the land could amount to an estimated \$591 million if it were developed, compared to \$3.6 million from the agricultural land.

"If new jobs cannot be created in Watsonville, and the tax base enhanced to support basic services, the community's current concerns with residential overcrowding, crime, schools and unemployment will persist and grow," wrote the author of the report, Manuel Dermer of DMS Research & Consulting Inc.

Watsonville High School agriculture teacher Lowell Hurst appears to be the swing vote in the city's upcoming bid to annex prime farmland.

Council members Todd McFerrin and Dennis Osmer have opposed the annexation in the past. Mayor Betty Bobeda and members Al Alcalá and Oscar Rios have supported it. Tony Campos, a real estate agent, has excused himself from voting to avoid a potential conflict.

Opponents of the annexation Wednesday urged Hurst to vote against the measure, saying it would have a devastating impact on the future of agriculture in the Pajaro Valley.

"Lowell Hurst teaches agriculture at Watsonville High School," said Chris Lyons-Johnson of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch. "A vote for pavement could in the long run move his class into the history department."

And Mike Jani, president of the county Farm Bureau, asked, "How is he going to look his students in the face and talk about the future of agriculture when he's contemplating allowing that quality of agricultural land to be developed?"

Hurst stood firmly in the middle of the road Thursday, saying that he waits to read the economic analysis and to hear from the public.

"The city has some extremely pressing needs, with the job situation, the unemployment, the need for additional commercial and industrial sites," Hurst

said. "There's a lot of agricultural guys who say we need a place to build a cooler or a processing or shipping or transportation facility, and then there's a lot of interest in agricultural preservation. I certainly support both of those concepts."

Hurst said the potential for economic development from the site, which straddles Highway 1, is tempting.

"You've got \$14 million a year driving by that land, and all of them have Visas in their pockets," said Hurst. "That lends itself to a potential for visitor serving capacity: a restaurant, a hotel, a gas station, something travelers

might avail themselves of."

But McFerrin says the city should exhaust all possibilities to do more "infill development" before it annexes more land.

"It's too much too quick here," said McFerrin. "I've always been in favor of reasonable growth, but to annex that much land in that quick a time would be disastrous for Watsonville. Growth has to be done in layers with a great deal of forethought. This could lead to dire consequences in terms of growth happening faster than we could deal with it."