

Watsonville council abandons Freedom annexation attempt

By STEVE STROTH
STAFF WRITER

Freedom School and the unincorporated areas west of Loma Prieta Avenue won't be annexed into Watsonville's city limits.

In a move that surprised city staffers, the Watsonville City Council Tuesday rejected a routine property-tax agreement that was necessary to keep the annexation process going.

The four council members who voted against the agreement said they sensed opposition to the annexation from public meetings held on the topic late last year.

City staffers had planned to present a council-approved property-tax agreement to the Local Agency Formation Commission by its Sept. 18 meeting. LAFCO has jurisdiction over all annexations in the county.

The agreement, which is required for all annexations, would merely have set up a new division of property-tax revenues between the city and the county for the area if it became part of the city. Such an agreement must exist before LAFCO can consider an annexation proposal. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the same agreement Aug. 6.

"It's my understanding that if this resolution is not adopted by (LAFCO's) Sept. 18 meeting, LAFCO will not proceed with annexation consideration," Planning Director Bud Carney told the council last night.

LAFCO Executive Officer Pat McCormick confirmed that notion when told of the council's action this morning.

"If that is so, then the city's application is dead," McCormick said.

The area which was to be considered for inclusion in the city is bordered roughly by Green Valley Road Extension, Airport Boulevard, Loma Prieta Avenue and Holm Road.

City staffers, who estimated about 400 homes are in that area, were surprised by the council action.

"I was under the impression that (the council) did want it to go to LAFCO and let the people of the area decide this for themselves," Carney said this morning.

Had LAFCO considered the issue, it would probably have allowed the city to set up public hearings and eventually an election among the area's registered voters, City Manager John Radin said this morning.

"What the council has done — or at least four people on the council — is effectively killed any opportunity for these people to decide for themselves," Radin said.

There had been some opposition to the annexation when several mobile home park residents learned that the city, unlike the county, has no rent-control laws. Some residents at public meetings said they feared their rent would go up if

the annexation went through.

Mayor Ann Soldo and Councilwoman Betty Murphy said Tuesday they voted against the tax agreement based on the opposition expressed at the previous public meetings.

However, Radin said the attendance at those public hearings was so low it is difficult to gauge how the people of the area feel about annexation.

He said a total of 16 people showed up for two meetings at the mobile home parks in the area.

"People who oppose something usually show up for these kinds of meetings, while the people who support it stay at home," Radin said. "If anything, that indicates very little opposition."