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Watsonville freezes Tai project

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Representatives for property owners seeking to annex 646 acres of agricultural land and sloughs into Watsonville for a residential development vowed to keep the project alive despite suffering a stunning setback Tuesday evening.

After getting green lights from city officials during seven years of discussions, Tai Associates' re-

quest to pre-zone the property between Highway 1 and the Pacific Ocean was denied by the Watsonville City Council. The 4-3 vote effectively puts the project on hold for at least a year.

"It makes no sense to me," said Omar James, an attorney for Tai Associates, who expressed shock at the council's decision. "It's preposterous for the city to acknowledge the need for housing and to ask us to develop a sup-

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plemental EIR (environmental impact report) at our expense, and a memorandum of understanding, all of which imply a willingness to work with us, and

then defeat it."

Tai Associates had sought to have the site, comprised of 17 parcels west of Lee Road, pre-zoned from commercial agricul-

ture to multiple residential and open space. Pre-zoning is required before the city can apply to the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission to annex the property.

Tai Associates' initial plans called for 1,800 units of housing to be built on 342 acres within the site, as described in the Watsonville general plan, although specific development plans for the property had not been assem-

bled.

Environmentalists and farmland preservationists, who had opposed the Tai project and other efforts to convert agricultural land for industrial or residential use, were elated with the council decision.

"We're pleased," said Bill Parkin, an attorney representing a coalition of organizations that filed a civil lawsuit challenging

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the environmental documents for the Tai project. "We'll see in the long run what happens, but for now, we're very happy they are not going forward with blazing speed."

James said his client still intends to move forward with development plans for the site, although a specific course of action has not been discussed.

Options for Tai Associates could include applying directly to the local agency commission to place the property in Watsonville's jurisdiction, returning to the city council in one year with another pre-zoning request or challenging the council's decision in court.

The Tai project is one of several land use issues that have divided Watsonville in recent months.

The local agency commission

is reviewing an application to place more than 700 acres, including 216 acres of farmland near Riverside Drive the city is considering for use as an industrial park, under Watsonville's sphere of influence. Councilman Tony Campos argued to postpone the council's decision until the commission rules on the Riverside Drive site, which is also under consideration, just south of the Tai property. But the council later voted down the request.