

Watsonville council mulls Franich delay

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The City Council appears willing to listen to the Local Agency Formation Commission's request for more time to decide the city's bid to annex a 72-acre parcel of agricultural land.

The council meets tonight to discuss granting LAFCO a continuance on the Franich family property annexation decision until after the city's general plan for the year 2005 is completed. LAFCO is the state agency charged with overseeing all incorporations, annexations and the creation of special districts.

The city wants to annex the property along East Lake Avenue for future use as the site of a school, park and hundreds of units of market-rate and affordable housing.

But LAFCO, according to executive officer Pat McCormick, thinks a completed general plan — detailing the city's visions of future growth — is "vital in making its final decision. ..."

Watsonville City Attorney Luis Hernandez recently received permission from principal property owner Tony Franich to allow a decision on the annexation attempt to be delayed until no later than Oct. 31.

The city, said Hernandez, is not obligated to grant the continuance, since it is party to a 1989 legal agreement between LAFCO and the city that requires the commission decide the Franich issue by July 29. The pact is designed to protect the applicant, in this case the city of Watsonville, from lengthy delays.

Mayor Oscar Rios said Monday he is leaning toward approving a continuance, and that he thought the Franich-general plan flap might draw more city residents into the process of planning the community's future.

More people from neighborhoods in the Calabasas/Buena Vista re-

Mayor Oscar Rios said he is leaning toward approving a continuance.

gion are attending general plan hearings since their region was mentioned by Franich detractors as an alternative to city expansion on the Franich property, Rios said.

"Perhaps this might also shed some more light on some of the opponents of Franich ... and why Franich is a site we should consider," said Rios. "If extending (the deadline) is going to create an environment where LAFCO can feel more secure ... to me there's no problem," he said.

LAFCO commissioners voted 4-1 on June 14 to delay a decision on the annexation request until the city completes its general plan for the year 2005, a blueprint for future city growth.

Four of the five LAFCO members — Capitola Vice Mayor Michael Routh, Scotts Valley Mayor Gina Koshland, county Supervisor Gary Patton and at-large appointee Robert Garcia — said they didn't want to decide the 12-year attempt to annex the property until after viewing the city's long-term growth objectives. Commissioner Ray Belgard of Watsonville, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, said he was ready to vote for the annexation.

If the city indeed offers the Oct. 31 deadline, McCormick said, "we'll have to consider, too, whether a relatively modest extension is worth the effort and what their general plan schedule looks like."

"I would imagine we would accommodate them to the degree that we can," he said. The Oct. 31 extension, McCormick said, would be sufficient, provided that the city has its general plan completed by then.