

Christine Johnson-Lyons of Watsonville Wetlands Watch inspects one of the shanties along the Pajaro River.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Many bridges to cross

Water,
wetlands,
growth,

and the
Pajaro
River

Tuesday

Irrigation, flood-control
needs complicate river
management.

Pajaro eyed for annexation

By TERESA JIMENEZ
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WATSONVILLE — To this city, the small community of Pajaro, population 3,332, is so close, yet so far:

Pajaro sits on the other side of the river of the same name, over a bridge and outside the Watsonville city limits. People there receive some services from the city, but are residents of Monterey County.

The area is compared, by some, with the Freedom area on the other side of Watsonville. Free-

dom has the highest concentration of immigrants from Mexico, and the lowest median household income of any area in Santa Cruz County.

To some in Watsonville, Pajaro seems a good candidate for annexation, but expansions across county lines are prohibited by the state constitution.

In the 1970s, a constitutional amendment was proposed to allow such annexations. Considerable opposition killed the proposal, said Peter Detweiler, staff for the state Senate Local Govern-

ment Committee.

Still, Watsonville City Council members have expressed an interest in trying to get the law changed.

Why the constitution forbids such an annexation has been "lost to history," Detweiler said, although there are practical reasons for keeping a city in one county.

Court jurisdiction, county services and funding of services are among the problems that would

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Pajaro eyed for city expansion

County workers, who make periodic visits to the Pajaro campgrounds have "found some pretty difficult (health) problems out here," said Christine Sippl, director of the county's Homeless Persons Health Project.

Health workers also worry about sanitary conditions; it's common for campers to bathe and wash clothes in the river's murky waters, although "fortunately" few drink it, said Sippl.

Christine Johnson-Lyons, executive director of the Community Action Board, a local anti-poverty group, and a member of Watsonville Wetlands Watch, said conditions appear to be "getting worse" in the camps. She and others are lobbying for portable toilets in the most populated areas.

And for those who need alcohol to numb the pain of homelessness, King Cobra malt liquor — "a real cheap, disgusting brand," said MacKee — is the drink of choice. Drugs and "cruising for sex" along the riverbank, he said, also are prevalent.

People with mental illnesses unwilling or unable to seek refuge in a traditional shelter, living in the relative isolation of the willows allows them to "carve out their own little area," said Sippl.

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arise in a two-county city, he said.

Watsonville City Manager Steve Salomon said expansion to Pajaro seems to make sense, since the city shares a school district and water management agency. The Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau and the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce have members from both sides of the county line, he said.

At Watsonville's library, 15 percent of the circulation is among Monterey County residents, Salomon said.

"The community of interest is pretty much the same," Salomon said. "Many people feel that Pajaro is a small area, and maybe doesn't get as much attention."

"A lot of Pajaro residents go to Watsonville for services," said Vanessa Vallarta, executive director of the Center for Community Advocacy, which has been working to improve farmworker housing in the area. "The county line is an artificial boundary."

But, she added, "I think the city of Watsonville would have a fight on its hands (if it tried to annex Pajaro)."

Monterey also is looking for places to grow, she explained, and has designated Pajaro as a "devel-



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*— Vanessa Vallarta,
Center for Community Advocacy*

opment incentive zone," which gives the area preference for county funds for projects such as affordable housing.

Monterey has made some improvements in Pajaro, installing water and sewer lines that are essential for large developments, but could do more, she said. It doesn't matter which government is in charge, though, what's important is "whatever's best for the people," she added.

Asked about the possibility of Watsonville annexing Pajaro, 23-year-old Pajaro resident Sylvia Saldana said, "I would have to think about it."

Saldana, who has lived in Pajaro

all her life, said, "It is a lot cheaper because it is out of the city limits."

The community is small and tight-knit, she said.

"I am all for low-income housing, but I don't know ... we're kind of apart from Watsonville," she added. "I've never heard anybody mention (a merger)."

In the 1980s, a proposition spurred by the city of Kingsburg, which straddles the Fresno and Tulare county line, was approved to allow expansion over a county line — sort of, Detweiler said.

State legislators decided that should both counties agree to change the county line, a land annexation by the city could be al-

lowed, Detweiler said. Both border changes must be made at the same time, he said.

About four counties have taken advantage of this policy change, Detweiler said.

For Watsonville, it would not be a simple process, according to Salomon.

"I've only seen the county line moved when there's a park or something involved. In those situations, there are no revenue issues or population issues," Salomon said. "They didn't do that for the Pajaro Valley School District. If you're going to do it, you have to have a city in two counties. There's no inherent reason why that would not work. There would have to be the political will on both sides to do it."

Pat McCormick, executive officer for the Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission, said annexing Pajaro only would expand the city's land use dilemma to the other side of the river.

"It would be like (Watsonville) annexing Freedom," McCormick said. "It wouldn't be a plum. There would be some in-fill potential for Pajaro, but then there would be the exact same issue over there — it's all prime ag land."