

Local news

Seniors rally to fight annexation

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WATSONVILLE — Seniors at the Bay Village and Pajaro Village retirement communities will be looking for a new ally in their battle to stop a new subdivision on the east side of town.

The Local Agency Formation Commission will hear a request Wednesday from city officials to annex 14 acres for a new subdivision, and opponents are expected to rally their forces for the early-morning special LAFCO meeting at City Hall.

The seniors who live in the two retirement communities are worried about far more than the 40 to 50 new homes that developer Bill Burgstrom proposes to build between East Lake Avenue and Salsipuedes Creek. They're worried about what looms not far behind: The development of nearly 500 new homes and an elementary school on the 72-acre Franich property, which

lies just 1,000 feet to the northwest of the proposed site.

For longtime Pajaro Village resident Marie Chrisman, the thriving rows of cabbage and lettuce between her community and the Franich property represent the last hope for a retirement of peace and quiet. Chrisman will celebrate her 20th anniversary in the tranquil community of elders on Labor Day weekend.

Like many of the residents in the village, Chrisman had planned on living out the rest of her days in the relative isolation. Now she fears the worst: an increase in crime, traffic, noise, vandalism. Nearly 300 of the area's residents have signed a petition opposing the development.

"We'll have thoroughfares where we have quiet little dead ends," she lamented. "I really hope LAFCO sticks to its guns and turns it down."

LAFCO executive officer Pat McCormick

wrote in a report to the commission that the annexation request doesn't conform to the county's policies. Those policies require the city to develop all available non-agricultural land, or at least land that is not classified as prime, before it begins to develop prime agricultural land.

Within the city, there are currently several vacant properties larger than the proposed annexation site that are planned for single-family residences: The Landmark area between Main Street and Highway 1, and the Franich area. In unincorporated areas that the city seeks to add to its sphere of influence, there are non-prime sites on land off of Buena Vista and Green Valley roads.

But the developer of the Landmark property has been stymied in his attempts to develop that property, which lies along one of the city's wetlands; and plans for the Franich property have been in the works, with the final

plan to come before the council later this spring.

Charlie Eadie of the city's Community Development Department says the city is trying vigorously to get other non-agricultural areas developed, but a variety of impediments have gotten in the way, he said. "It just doesn't make sense to hold up the annexation because of other developments' predicaments," he said. A majority of the City Council agreed with Eadie; Councilwoman Betty Bobeda was the only one to vote against it.

McCormick suggests a possible compromise, in which the city could "beef up" its own buffer policy for the two neighborhoods, giving them a substantial green belt rather than the 200-acre strip required by the city's policy.

Wednesday's LAFCO meeting will begin at 8:30 in the City Council chamber at 250 Main St., with the public hearing beginning shortly afterwards.