

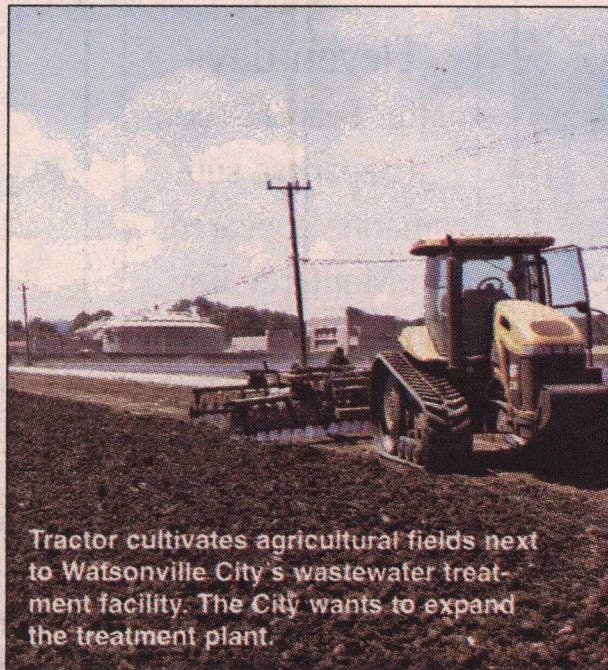
Watsonville Backs Off Plan to Annex Coastal Lands

by Michael Thomas

Most expect that Watsonville's plan to annex a 16-acre parcel of land from the County of Santa Cruz will be rejected. The City had planned to build an addition to Watsonville's existing water treatment facility to increase the use of reclaimed water. However, environmentalists opposed the project because of its location west of Highway 1. For now, the City appears resigned to leaving the land under County jurisdiction, which means the proposed new plant will have to seek approval from the County Planning Commission and County Board of Supervisors and meet the County's zoning and building requirements.

Roughly five years ago, the City had agreed with the Coastal Commission and the County of Santa Cruz not to expand the City west of Highway 1. Under the agreement, the City agreed not to annex any further lands on the ocean side of Highway 1 in exchange for approval of the new Pajaro Valley High School. The school is slated to open this fall and is operated by the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

The deal protecting coastal lands from future development was brokered by then-Assemblymember Fred Keeley,



Tractor cultivates agricultural fields next to Watsonville City's wastewater treatment facility. The City wants to expand the treatment plant.

who is now Treasurer-Tax Collector for the County of Santa Cruz.

The environmental group Wetlands Watch feared that annexing land for the recycled water plant would set a bad precedent.

"Every time something comes up, we'll change the [agreement] and annex land here and annex land there," warned Wetland Watch's Bob Culbertson. "When you start having little chunks of land here and there that are annexed to the City, the next step is the infill that connects them."

The property is currently zoned for commercial agricultural use. Unlike the City of Watsonville's Council, the County has been extremely reluctant to convert agricultural land to other uses.

City Could Recycle 7 Million Gallons of Water per Day with Project

The property in question is next door to the City's wastewater treatment plant, which already exists as an island of City territory surrounded by unincorporated County lands. According to David Cook of the City's water department, the facility will recycle over 7 million gallons of used water every day, cleansing it to the level where it can be used to irrigate nearby farmlands. The land the City purchased for the project is currently farmland. About half of the 16 acres would be developed.

"It makes sense that the City would add that adjoining piece," Cook said. However, he added, "The City is not

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really wedded to annexation. We are simply looking for a way to make the permits [happen]."

Cook said the Water Department was planning to start construction this summer, but will now push the project back until at least next spring.

According to City Manager Carlos Palacios, getting permits from the County will require the City to jump through some extra hoops, including having County inspectors review the site and plans rather than the City's own staff. But he hopes the County will allow the City to do some of that work and then sign off on it.

"We are trying to work out an agreement where the County would allow us to take the lead in the process," Palacios said. He said the final, combined facility "would be a little bit awkward in that half of the water treatment facility would be in the City of Watsonville and half in the County."

City Trying to Avoid Well Contamination

Palacios said that during discussions of the 2000 agreement, the City warned that it would someday apply to annex the land for the recycled water facility. "We were always told, 'When you are ready, just come back with an amendment.'"

However, the compromise strategy may allow the City to complete a popular project while still satisfying groups like Wetlands Watch who want to see strict controls on

future City expansion.

According to Cook, the recycled water produced by the plant could support over 1,600 acres of crops, reducing farmers' dependency on wells that are presently threatened by saltwater seeping in to fill depleted aquifers. The \$28 million system is similar to one already running in Scotts Valley, but on a much larger scale.

"That's a great idea," Culbertson said. "[Presenting] the alternative of using recycled water to raise plants is great, but you don't need the annex to do that."

Culbertson said the annexation agreement was essential to the former high school deal.

"This was a very crucial agreement for us. We want them to stick to it," he added. □