

LAFCO rejects city housing plan

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WATSONVILLE — A proposed 14-acre extension of the Pajaro Village retirement community was denied, with opponents saying the targeted agricultural land should be preserved.

In a 5-2 decision, the Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) denied the annexation proposal at its meeting Wednesday. The commission is the state-chartered agency responsible for approving changes to governmental boundaries in the county.

After the vote was taken, Commissioner Lowell Hurst, who along with Commissioner Ray Belgard favored the annexation, said aloud, "Once again LAFCO snubs its nose at the citizens of Watsonville."

After the meeting Hurst said he

was frustrated. "We are hogtied by this annexation blackmail," said Hurst, who is also a Watsonville city councilman. During the meeting Hurst expressed a need for new housing in Watsonville.

"It took 14 years to get the Franich property through LAFCO," he said, referring to 74 acres near the East Lake Shopping Center slated a residential neighborhood. "How long is this going to take?"

The developers, a partnership called Village Associates headed by Bill Burgstrom, proposed building up to 100 homes on a parcel on the east side of town near the Salispuedes Creek.

More than 60 senior citizens, who live near the proposed annexation, turned out Wednesday to denounce the project. Many said they wouldn't be upset if the new homes were restricted to people 55 and over, but that there is no guarantee of that.

Developers said they were "leaning toward" senior housing for the property.

LAFCO denied the proposal

"without prejudice," which means the developers may request annexation again next year.

In denying the annexation, the five other commissioners cited state law and LAFCO policy, which stipulate that agriculture land "should be annexed last," according LAFCO Executive Officer Pat McCormick.

"We cannot convert agricultural uses to residential," said Commissioner Katherine Beiers, who is also a Santa Cruz councilwoman.

Commissioner Jim Van Houten agreed. He said the proposal was "at best premature, and at worst inappropriate." Other vacant parcels around Watsonville should be built first, he said.

Hurst retorted: "Even if Franich and every vacant lot in Watsonville were developed, there would still be a shortage of housing. The population of the city is expanding, but the boundaries aren't. Farm employment has grown 100 percent in 10 years, but the housing hasn't."

Hurst and Belgard, a Santa Cruz County supervisor, said it was the commission has a duty to weigh the exceptional circumstance of Watsonville's overcrowding.

"Garages are filled with people here," said Belgard, who lives in Watsonville.

City officials estimate that Watsonville is 5,000 homes short of its need.

McCormick had initially proposed a compromise between LAFCO and the city but it was not addressed by the commission. He had proposed the city strengthening buffers between urban development and farmland in return for LAFCO approval of the annexation.

The future for city annexations

Wednesday's decision marked the first LAFCO rejection of a Watsonville annexation in a long time, said McCormick.

The last time was in 1974 when LAFCO turned down a 600-acre annexation proposal around Riverside Drive near Highway 1.

City officials hope they can overcome the political sentiment revealed by the commissioners Wednesday: That farmland should be preserved for agricultural use.

"We have a very hard job ahead of educating the county of our needs," said Watsonville City Manager Carlos Palacios this morning.

The city has two other applications pending at LAFCO. One is a 214-acre annexation proposal in the southwest corner of town off Riverside Drive, where city officials would like to see an industrial park.

The other is a proposed increase in the city's sphere of influence, a boundary outside city limits that indicates the city's range of possible future development.

Both proposals involve farmland.

Palacios said he hopes the two applications aren't jeopardized by the Wednesday decision on the 14-acre proposal. He said the commissioners need more information on the situation.

"We hope we when present Watsonville's critical need for housing, that (LAFCO) will be willing to work with us," Palacios said. "They feel very strongly about the preservation of ag land, as does the city council. But we need to provide balance in the community — we have to be able to grow somewhat."



Hurst