

Watsonville council OKs controversial annexation

WATSONVILLE — The City Council here Tuesday night overwhelmingly approved the annexation of 74 acres of agricultural land on East Lake Avenue.

Environmentalists in the county fought the annexation through two meetings of the Local Agency Formation Commission, and lost both times.

The commission's executive director, Pat McCormick, opposed the full annexation and suggested 19 acres go to the city instead of the full 74. At a September meeting, however, the commission voted 3-2 for the annexation and unanimously upheld that decision at a special meeting later in the month.

L AFC members are Scotts Valley Councilman Rod Pulley, Capitola Councilman Michael Routh, commission Chairman Stan Nielsen, and Santa Cruz County supervisors Gary Patton and Joe Cucchiara. Cucchiara is an alternate member, and replaced Supervisor Robley Levy at those meetings.

Patton and Cucchiara vehemently opposed the move, saying it was the beginning of the end to agriculture in the Pajaro Valley.

"We have been trying to remain a county where agriculture is our sustaining force," Patton said at the first L AFC meeting on the annexation. "We are casting this aside, and are casting our lot with the electronics industry that destroyed the

Santa Clara Valley."

Both feel additional annexations will be requested and granted in the area.

But the owner of the orchard, Attorney Anthony Franich — and one of the area's largest farmers, J.J. Crosetti — both said the acreage was not prime farm land.

It can't sustain intensive row farming, and the orchard is no longer economically feasible to harvest, they said.

There is room for 358 dwelling units on the land, which borders the East Lake Shopping Center the commission was told.

The City Council Tuesday night approved zoning for the parcel. Thirty-six acres are zoned single-family residential; about 15 acres are zoned medium density multiple residential; another 14 are zoned high-density multiple residential, and slightly more than 4½ acres are zoned office commercial. Three acres are set aside for a park.

The City Council had tried to avoid Tuesday's public hearing, required by L AFC; but the commission turned down the council's request to dispense with the hearing.

However, only a few people showed up to speak, said City Clerk Dorothy Bennett this morning, and those were in favor of the annexation. The vote of approval was unanimous, with Councilmember Ann Soldo absent.