

✓ **LAFCO**

girds for hearing

Watsonville's expansion plan a hot potato

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SANTA CRUZ — Gearing up for what promises to be a heated and emotional public hearing next month on proposed annexations into the city of Watsonville, the Local Agency Formation Commission met Wednesday to discuss how to handle the situation.

Specifically, the LAFCO board will hear arguments for and against adding a total of 733 acres to the city's sphere of influence — or the projected city limits. If LAFCO approves, the city can then attempt to have the acreage annexed into the city — paving the way for an industrial park and housing.

The first parcel on the city's agenda is the Riverside Drive and Highway 1 area, some 219 acres of prime farmland. If LAFCO approves adding that area to the city's sphere of influence, the city would be ready to present the argument for annexation immediately.

Wednesday's LAFCO meeting centered around the details of the public hearing, which is expected to draw a large crowd on both sides of the issue. It will be at 7:15 p.m. on Sept. 3 at Lakeview Middle School.

The commission will hold another meeting prior to the Sept. 3 hearing to hear final staff reports on every aspect of the proposed annexations. That meeting, while open to the public, will not be a public hearing.

One of the issues discussed Wednesday was whether the LAFCO board should expect a recommendation from its staff — either for approval or denial.

"I'm not a chicken, I can provide one if you want," LAFCO Executive Officer Pat McCormick told the board. "But it can detract from the focus of the hearing."

Board members, however, decided they would like a recommendation — if for no other reason than to give the public a position to respond to.

The board also said it should make clear at the beginning of the hearing that it would most likely be continued to the October LAFCO meeting, perhaps even beyond. The board is expecting a long line of speakers and doesn't believe it will have time to hear them all in one night and then make a decision.

Meanwhile, annexation opponent and farmer Sam Earnshaw announced the formation of the Pajaro Valley Futures Project, a planning group being put together to find a method to allow the city to grow without developing farmland and wetlands areas.

The project is being funded by the Packard Foundation.

Involved in this project are the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, the County Farm Bureau and Watsonville Wetlands Watch. The group has also invited a member of the Watsonville City Council to join.

The group will begin its research this month.