

# Farmland addition gutted

Watsonville - Annexation

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WATSONVILLE — The proposed Riverside Drive annexation got a whole lot smaller Wednesday night, as the Local Agency Formation Commission voted to allow only 94 acres into the city of Watsonville's sphere of influence.

The city was trying to add 219 acres of prime farmland at Riverside Drive and Highway 1 to build an industrial park. LAFCO, after an exhaustive public hearing and hours of testimony at Lakeview Middle School, voted 4-3 to save most of the land and allow only the property owned by MF Farming into the city's projected city limits.

The commission also voted to add 249 acres in the West Buena Vista Drive area to the city's sphere of influence. The rest of the proposal was rejected by a series of amendments brought by LAFCO Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt.

In addition to losing more than half of Riverside, the city was also denied 12 acres near the airport, 122

## Watsonville's Riverside proposal slashed from 219 to 94 acres

acres of a wildlife refuge owned by the California Department of Fish and Game, and 74 acres in the North Calabasas and East Atkinson Lane area.

In total, the city sought to add more than 700 acres total to the city's sphere of influence. LAFCO instead voted to allow only 343 acres.

The city can now apply to annex those 343 acres into the city. The rest of the proposal, however, is out for now.

When the public hearing closed, Commissioner Ray Belgard immediately moved to grant the city's full request. Wormhoudt went into action, serving up four amendments — all of which passed by narrow margins.

Another motion was brought to deny the entire Riverside area; it failed 4-3.

It was a complicated and confusing ordeal for the audience, which started out with about 125 people and ended with about half of that. Most seemed to oppose the proposal, and were pleased by LAFCO's reduction.

Commissioners Belgard and Lowell Hurst pleaded with the rest of the panel to reconsider and allow all of Riverside, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

"Clearly (Riverside) was the most difficult of all," Commissioner Katherine Beiers said. "And it has to do with the quality of that ag land. For that to be paved over I need to be totally convinced that it's the right direction for Watsonville and its future. ... I was

not convinced the jobs were going to be there."

The city's proposal said the 219 acres at Riverside could create as many as 3,500 jobs. The commission wasn't buying that argument.

Wormhoudt cited the 100-acre Landmark property, annexed into the city in 1972, as a possible alternative for economic development. LAFCO Chairman Roger Anderson also said other areas in the city could be redeveloped to help Watsonville solve its high unemployment problem.

Hurst, who also serves on the City Council in Watsonville and has voted in favor of the annexation proposal, was clearly disappointed by Wormhoudt's motion to eliminate Riverside.

"The motion eats away at the heart of our general plan," he said. "It gives us nothing, essentially."

He referred to the adoption of the West Buena Vista area as "cruel joke." The city wanted to build housing there, but in conjunction with new industry at Riverside.

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## Riverside

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The commission also voted to continue the issue at its Oct. 29 meeting. The panel could not agree on a set of conditions for the land it is allowing into the sphere of influence.

It was nearly unable to reach a decision at all, going back and forth on what to do with Riverside — elimi-

nate it entirely, or allow just the 94 acres. Finally, the vote to allow the reduced acreage was accepted at about 11:30 p.m.

"We absolutely have to find another direction to go," Beiers said.

And the commission did just that, much to the disappointment of city officials who have been working on the proposal for two years.