

Supervisors oppose Watsonville Franich annexation bill

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A pitched battle raged this morning between Watsonville attorney Tony Franich and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors over his attempt to get the state Legislature to grant him permission to annex his 72-acre orchard to Watsonville for construction of 600 housing units.

Supervisors, including Watsonville-area board member Sherry Mehl, did not take

kindly to his attempt to overstep their authority on a local land-use issue.

Franich has managed to get Santa Clara County Assemblyman Dominic Cortese to introduce a bill that would allow Franich's property, located next to the East Lake Village shopping center, to be annexed without going through normal county procedures.

Franich tried county procedures in 1982, when he persuaded the Local Agency Formation Commission

(LAFCO) to approve the annexation. The LAFCO decision was subsequently challenged in court, however, by the Resource Defense Fund, which persuaded the state Court of Appeal that LAFCO had failed to consider alternative uses for part of the property, which might have been left as agricultural land. The court said, in essence, that Franich had to go back through LAFCO.

Meanwhile, LAFCO had acquired new commissioners, including Gary Patton, and

Franich is now maintaining he can't get a fair hearing there.

In an April 15 letter to LAFCO, Cortese said he was sponsoring the bill for Franich, because LAFCO had made the environmental considerations the court said it hadn't.

Franich made an emotional address to the supervisors this morning, trying to talk them out of opposing Cortese's legislation on his behalf. He claimed 40 percent of the apple trees on the land are dead, and that the

soil is not very good. Furthermore, he said, "Apples are dead in the (Pajaro) Valley" as a viable cash crop.

Franich brought with him Watsonville Councilman Rex Clark, who accused the supervisors of "racism, pure and simple," if they opposed the Cortese bill.

Clark said the board would be racist because 90 of the 600 units slated for Franich's land would be affordable housing which would likely be occupied

by Hispanics.

Board Chairman Joe Cucchiara took umbrage at the accusation.

"I regret that the needs of poor, disadvantaged people of color are being brought in to be used as pawns of a special interest," he said.

All the supervisors except Dan Forbus indicated they were angry with Franich for going to Sacramento before even trying

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to get LAFCO to hear the matter again.

"I'm very supportive of local control," said Supervisor Mehl, who is also the former head of the county Farm Bureau. "It is not a good idea to change the entire process because you don't like the people running the process now."

During Mehl's speech, Franich could be heard to say to Clark, "Do you want to run next time?"

Supervisor Robley Levy also chastised Franich.

"We do have strong policies in this county to protect agricultural land, policies which are supported broadly (by the people). To see special-interest legislation that makes it impossible to make decisions that reflect the concerns of local people is a dangerous and damaging precedent."

Gary Patton pointed out that Franich had no evidence to show his annexation proposal would be rejected by LAFCO.

"It may be appropriate to annex this land. I certainly have an open mind as a member of LAFCO," Patton said. He said the county must "stand up against this kind of (legislative) maneuver."

Patton also said that Franich stood to make a large amount of money if his land is sold for development purposes, and that Cortese's bill would benefit Franich and no one else.

Supervisor Forbus said, however, "The political process is not working here. No one who knows LAFCO would believe that Tony Franich could get a fair hearing, because of the current make-up of LAFCO."

The board voted to oppose the Cortese bill, with Forbus voting "no" and Mehl abstaining.