

Watsonville - Annexation

Farmland annexation discussion tonight

By TRACY L. BARNETT

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WATSONVILLE — Opponents to the city's proposal to annex 216 acres of prime farmland near Riverside Drive and Highway 1 for an industrial park say they'd like to be included in discussions of a compromise.

Two City Council members opposed to the annexation — which has already been approved in concept, and will be discussed at tonight's council meeting — have been casting about for alternatives that would lessen community opposition to the plan. But the attorney

representing citizen groups in a lawsuit concerning the annexation, and one of the lead petitioners say they've never been contacted by the city regarding a compromise — and they'd like to be.

"The door has always been open for a settlement, and they've never come through that door," said Bill Parkin, attorney for three citizen groups who sued in January, demanding that the city conduct an environmental impact review of the proposed annexation. Such a process would allow for a more critical, tract-by-tract analysis of the impact of development, Parkin said.

The city staff's idea of using some of the land for a Watsonville Slough restoration project appeals to Parkin and Chris Johnson-Lyons, a member of Watsonville Wetlands Watch and one of the chief petitioners in the lawsuit.

If the city develops playing fields on the land, as Councilman Todd McFarren suggested, the city could develop a multi-use city park with a wetlands interpretive center nearby, said Charlie Eadie of the city's Community Development Department.

But the group is still holding out for an environmental impact study, and

Lyons doubts opponents are going to settle for anything less. The plaintiffs in the case are the Community Alliance of Family Farmers, the Sierra Club and the Environmental Council.

At a July council meeting, McFarren directed the city staff to explore the possibility of applying to the Local Agency Formation Commission to annex the land, but to offer some concessions to opponents. He suggested that the city offer to use part of the land for a park, with badly needed playing fields, and to agree not to annex a sepa-

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rate, equally controversial tract — the Tai property at Harkins Slough and Lee roads.

"I think that would be great if they got those concessions," Parkin said. "We'd have to look at the entire package; we wouldn't want to make a pact with the devil to accomplish what we want to accomplish. If we're talking about massive commercial development stretching across the freeway over into the coastal zone, it starts to get real dicey."

Parkin said opponents will fight the annexation of any land on the west side of Highway 1, a small portion of the entire 216 acres. That is "non-negotiable," he said.

City staff has recommended against linking the Tai property annexation with the Riverside annexation, saying that the two properties are unrelated. An environmental impact report on the Tai property is expected next month.

Councilman Oscar Rios, one of the strongest proponents of the annexation, is skeptical of the opportunity for compromise.

"Here we are talking about court suits, while if this thing is delayed, hundreds of kids don't have parks, don't have places where they can do positive things, and they're growing every minute of every day," he said. "If you don't have things for them to do, what is the future for them?"

Placating the opponents with an

environmental report would not resolve the situation, because "after that, they'll just come up with another issue," Rios said. "Some of these people just don't want any land to be annexed."

But Parkin said opponents have never been opposed to all annexations. "We're not saying don't develop any piece at all; we're saying give us the facts first so we can make an informed decision." An environmental report could answer those questions and allow the city to avoid costly litigation, Parkin said.

The Watsonville City Council meets at 3:45 and 7:30 tonight at the Council Chamber, 250 Main St. The annexation discussion is scheduled for the afternoon meeting.