

# Judge halts development on Watsonville farmland

## Environmental report questioned

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WATSONVILLE — Environmentalists declared victory Tuesday after a Superior Court judge ruled against a controversial environmental report needed for land development west of town.

The decision centers on the need for Watsonville officials to clearly define "prime agricultural land."

The environmental impact report evaluated the proposed 646-acre housing and commercial development west of Highway 1 and Lee Road.

Tuesday's ruling means the city of Watsonville report will have to be rewritten or the decision appealed. Named in the suit was the city of Watsonville and Tai & Associates, which owns about 350 acres of the land targeted for development.

Out of a laundry list of complaints brought against the city's report by the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley, Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Sam Stevens threw out all but one Tuesday — the definition of prime agricultural

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land.

"(The environmentalist) challenge was that our definition was irrational," said Watsonville City Attorney Alan Smith after the ruling. "But (Stevens') concern was that we did not define it clearly enough in the public review."

The land that would be designated by the city for development is agricultural land considered "prime" by the county and the California Coastal Commission, according to attorney Keith Sugar, who represents a coalition of groups that make up the campaign. "We were against it because it's going to convert some of the best ag land in the state," Sugar said.

The opponents to the development of the farmland have taken a firm stand against any developments on land west of Highway 1, Sugar said, because it would conceptually open up that land to even more development, he said.

"This would set a very bad precedent," Sugar said.

Based on the decision by Stevens, the matter may have to go before the public again in a new public hearing on a revised environmental report.

"It's our belief that if that's done it will be DOA (dead on arrival)," Sugar said.

Smith, however, considered the ruling only a minor setback.

"We've already circulated this plan twice (to the public)," Smith said. "I don't view it as a criticism of the city's definition of prime ag land." The definition just wasn't made clear enough at the public hearings and in this particular document, he said.

"We disagree with his decision," Smith said.

The ruling is on such a narrow point, said Tai & Associates spokesman Steven Hixson, that it might be more a matter of dotting i's and crossing t's.

"We believe that other people (judges) would not have taken this position," Hixson said. "We're disappointed."

Opponents to the city's plan, however, say the judge focused on the key issue.

"This definition (of what is prime agricultural land) is what the whole thing turns on," Sugar said. "By every other (agency's) definition it falls under prime ag land."

Exactly what action the city will take is uncertain and will have to be decided by the Watsonville City Council, Smith said.

"The city is not going to do anything precipitous or irrational," Smith said.

Plans to expand the city to include the Tai property and other areas west of Highway 1 are essential for meeting the crisis-level demand for low-income housing and jobs in the Watsonville area, Hixson said.

"Affordable housing is in huge demand," Hixson noted.

Those opposed to the development of agricultural land counter that there is already too much development around the Watsonville slough system, and protection of it and the irreplaceable farmland is essential.

"This is a victory because it sends the city back to square one," Sugar said.

Among the groups involved in the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley are the Sierra Club, the California Alliance for Family Farms, the Environmental Council of Santa Cruz County, the Comité de Derechos Humanos and others, Sugar said.