

City Council opens way to annexation

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WATSONVILLE — The City Council voted last night to take a first step toward annexing county land it hopes will attract industry and create badly needed jobs.

By a 4-2 vote, the council approved a controversial rezoning application for a 216-acre parcel on the west side of Watsonville roughly bounded by Highway 1, Riverside Drive, Beach and Lee roads.

The vote came after a long and sometimes philosophical discussion on whether preserving existing agricultural jobs on the parcel was more important than creating expansion opportunities for industry.

In a city with an average 20 percent unemployment, the issue is more than academic.

Community activist and author Frank Bardacke likened the council's preference for trying to attract industry to trading a bird in the hand for two in the bush.

"We're told it's better to give up the jobs we've got because of the promise of jobs that might come," he said.

He accused the council of treating annexation as a panacea for an unemployment problem created by the loss of 5,000 frozen food jobs over the last decade.

"The main reason for unemployment in this town has nothing to do with its boundaries," he said.

City Manager Steve Salomon agreed that Watsonville's unemployment woes began with the migration of food processing operations to Mexico, but noted that a steady growth in Watsonville's work-age population has also contributed to the problem.

Expansion in existing sites in

Watsonville is limited and some key employers are beginning to look elsewhere, he said.

Watsonville's general plan has designated the Riverside area parcel a key job-producing area over the next 10 years. Industrial development on what is now mostly prime agricultural land promises to yield 3,555 new jobs, according to the city's Assistant Planning Director Charles Eadie.

An additional projected 3,600 retail and commercial jobs within existing city limits depend largely on the industrial jobs, he said.

Annexation is necessary to attract industry, he said, because "if you don't have vacant, zoned industrial land, you're very limited in your ability to generate the amount of employment that's needed here."

Whereas an industrial park will bring 15 new jobs per acre to Watsonville, agriculture yields only half a job per acre, he said.

Those statistics were disputed by Councilman Todd McFarren, who with Councilman Dennis Osmer voted against the rezoning application.

Councilman Al Alcalá was one of the most vocal supporters of approving it.

Watsonville has seen West Marine, the Marinovich candy factory and other businesses leave town because room to expand is limited, he said.

Council members seemed reluctant to vote on the issue; several motions to put it to a vote went unseconded.

Although the measure passed, he does not believe the council has the political will to carry out the unpopular annexation, Osmer said.

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Rezoning is a first step in annexing county agricultural land to the city, often a precursor to development since converting county commercial agricultural land to another use is more difficult.

The Local Agency Formation Commission will now consider the application for annexation. If it is approved, specific development proposals will be considered by the City Council.

Environmentalists and community organizers but no farmers spoke out against the application last night. The county's Agricultural Advisory Commission, a group comprised of farmers, previously asked the County Board of Supervisors to take a stand against annexing the parcel and all other prime agricultural land.

In other council action:

- Watsonville police chief Terry Medina presented a check for \$3,267.80 to members of Together in Pajaro, a community group that helped Pajaro residents after the March floods.

The money was the last of the proceeds from video sales of flood footage produced by members of the police department. TIP volunteers received \$3,100 for the group by selling copies of the video at the Santa Cruz County Fair in September.

- Council members formally approved two 3 percent raises for City Manager Steve Salomon.

The raises, which make him the highest paid city manager in Santa Cruz County, were first approved by the council last month. When critics charged that the process had violated state open government laws, the council agreed to include the item on last night's meeting agenda.

- The council approved a one-year \$20,000 city contract with Mighty Mulch, a start-up yard waste recycling facility located off Airport Boulevard in Watsonville.

Under the contract, Watsonville residents may dump their grass and yard trimmings at the recycling site free of charge.

- The council approved a \$15,000 contract with Fenix Services to provide support services for a job-training program overseen by the city.

The council was expected to routinely approve the contract two weeks ago. Instead, Councilman Dennis Osmer pulled the item from the agenda when he learned police had arrested a Fenix employee on suspicion of stabbing another youth.

Charges against the employee were dismissed for lack of evidence. Osmer said he was satisfied with the contract, and the item was placed on last night's consent agenda.