

City vote set for annexing farmland

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WATSONVILLE — A much-needed city park and a wetlands restoration project could be the olive branch that moves a controversial annexation proposal forward Tuesday.

The City Council is expected to vote on how to proceed with the annexation of 216 acres of prime farmland near Riverside Drive and Highway 1 at its afternoon meeting on Tuesday. Last month a majority of council members approved pre-zoning the land for an industrial park, but stopped short of sending the application for annexation on to the Local Agency Formation Commission for approval.

Councilman Todd McFarren, one of two members who opposed the annexation, proposed a compromise at the July 24 council meeting. His suggestion: Head off some of the community opposition to the annexation by devoting a part of the farmland to soccer and baseball fields, and by agreeing to sacrifice the future annexation of a separate tract — the 600-acre Tai property at Lee and Harkins Slough roads.

A staff report to the City Council endorses McFarren's idea of developing parks, and expands the idea to include a discussion of a possible wetlands-restoration project on the land.

"Currently, the Watsonville Slough in that area is little more than an agricultural drainage ditch," Community Development Administrator Dave Williams wrote in the report. "Development of the Riverside area properties would present the City with an opportunity to restore wetlands and enhance habitat values for that portion of the slough system."

Such a project was recommended in a study of the Watsonville Slough system released last fall by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments.

The Watsonville City Council meets at 3:45 and 7:30 on Tuesday, Aug. 20, at the Council Chamber, 250 Main St.