

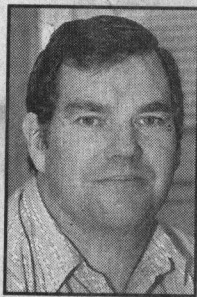
Board blocks annexation of ag land

Watsonville - Annexation

5-8-97

Vote seen as harbinger of future

By **BOB LINNEMAN**
and **TRACY L. BARNETT**
Sentinel staff writers



Dennis Osmer

'This one should have been a slam dunk.'

WATSONVILLE — In a sneak preview of what might lie ahead for the city, a county board slapped down Watsonville's first seriously contested annexation request in four years on Wednesday morning.

Observers say the Local Agency Formation Commission's 5-2 vote does not bode well for the city's plan to annex 216 acres for an industrial park on Riverside Drive.

"It sends a bad message from LAFCO in the future for what to expect," said Councilman Tony Campos. "If they don't look at an area that's designated for growth, how are they going to look at areas that we need for creation of jobs and housing that aren't even in the sphere of influence yet?"

Wednesday's hearing centered on a developer's housing proposal. Bill Burgstrom, representing Village Associates, had hoped for LAFCO's approval so he could build homes on the 14-acre site now occupied by a cabbage patch.

But a group of senior citizens from the Bay Village and Pajaro Village retirement communities, fearing disruption of their quiet, tight-knit community, opposed annexation of the prime agricultural land.

LAFCO voted against the annexation, following its own guidelines requiring the development of non-agricultural land first.

"I'm delighted, I truly am," senior leader Marie Chrisman said after the public hearing Wednesday

day morning at Watsonville City Hall. However, she expects the developer to continue his fight and to return before the LAFCO board in the future.

"It'll come back," Chrisman predicted. "And I'm only 77, so I'll be back too, and fighting."

But Burgstrom isn't so sure. He hasn't given up yet, he said. But he's been working to develop the land for nearly 20 years, and he said Wednesday he's about ready to cut his losses.

"They said it wasn't timely; but after 20 years, if it's not timely now, who knows when it will be?" he said. "We could come back, that's true. But I can't see what purpose it would serve."

Burgstrom, who also owns a parcel of the proposed Riverside annexation land, hopes that LAFCO will relent on the question of job development and approve that annexation, despite its concern about development of prime farmland.

But the decision led Watsonville City Councilman Dennis Osmer to question the city's strategy, or lack

Please see ANNEXATION — BACK PAGE

A-12 — Thursday, May 8, 1997 — Sentinel

Annexation voted down

Continued from Page A1

thereof, when it comes to annexing farmland into the city.

"If we can't get Burgstrom done, how can we possibly get Riverside done?" Osmer asked, referring to the Riverside Drive annexation straddling Highway 1. "(LAFCO's decision) supports what I've said before. We need to look at what our strategy is going to be. What we're doing now is not working. We are our own worst enemy."

Osmer believes the city must work with LAFCO and address the agency's concerns about ag land development before any of its annexation proposals will be allowed to move forward.

"This one should have been a slam dunk," Osmer said of the parcel near the south end of Tuttle Avenue. "It's completely surrounded by urban use. It's horrible making ag work there. It should be the least contentious thing."

But it wasn't. A large group of seniors who live in Bay Village and Pajaro Village turned out for the meeting and were vocal in their opposition. They said a housing development bordering theirs would lead to more crime and spoil the quiet and peaceful way of life the

seniors currently enjoy.

The seniors applauded the LAFCO board after the vote denying the annexation. Board members voting against the proposal were Mardi Wormhoudt, Carol Bell, Katherine Beiers, Jim Van Houten and Robley Levy.

The developer, on the other hand, was not pleased. "We feel like we've been run over by a steam roller," Burgstrom said. "They say the timing is not right. Yet there are people living in garages."

LAFCO panelists Ray Belgard, of the County Board of Supervisors, and Lowell Hurst, a Watsonville city councilman, both favored the annexation, citing the city's need for more housing.

After a motion to deny the annexation was brought by Wormhoudt, Belgard made another motion to amend it to delay a vote until the full LAFCO panel could be present. Chairman Roger Anderson was absent Wednesday and Levy, an alternate, sat in his place. Levy opposed the annexation.

The board also voted 5-2 to deny Belgard's amendment — with only Belgard and Hurst voting in favor.

Osmer called the LAFCO vote a

test for the city's other annexation deals. Since this one failed, the others could be doomed as well.

"Our strategy should be to try to change the policy that gets in the way," Osmer said. "It's not going to happen unless we start approaching LAFCO more collaboratively."

Hurst, referring to the city's housing shortage, said "once again, LAFCO snubs its nose at the city of Watsonville. ... The pressure is not going to go away. We better get a handle on our housing situation."

Proponents of the annexation said the site in question was originally supposed to be the third phase of Pajaro Village and the utilities and infrastructure are already in place, making it ideal for housing.

But residents of the area, in addition to expressing worries about crime and overcrowding, said the area is in the flood plain of Salspuedes Creek and residents could be subjected to evacuation during heavy rain.

"Two years in a row we've been evacuated," senior resident Allison McEvoy said. "This is supposed to go in right there, so they'll have to be evacuated too. It's a hardship."