

# City officials consider annexation of Tai land

By DIANE NOLAND

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — A golden eagle swept past a group which had gathered west of town mid-morning Monday to view farm land proposed for annexation to the city.

The city's Planning Commission invited city officials, environmentalists and local reporters out to see the land, familiarly known as the Tai Property, a 600-acre parcel that begins at Harkins Slough and Lee roads just across Highway 1 at the end of Green Valley Road. The property is owned by Vincent Tai, owner of Tai and Associates, a San Francisco-based development group.

Proponents of the annexation want to develop the land for housing; housing that almost everyone agrees is "desperately" needed in Watsonville.

But opponents say this particular property is the wrong place to build homes.

"This is one of the most valuable properties in the state," said Jerry Busch, a representative of Wetlands Watch, a group that seeks to preserve open space.

"It was declared a unique ecosys-

tem by the federal government," Busch said. "They rated this area 14th in value statewide."

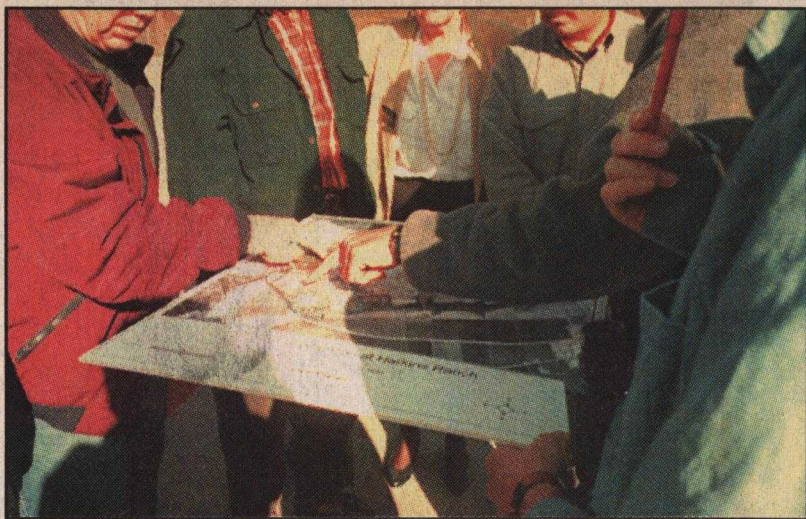
Bordering the west side of the Tai Property is a marshy wetlands area, frequently flooded in rainy seasons, that provides sanctuary and sustenance to birds and small critters, and the rest is mostly softly rolling hills with some steep ones. Little is flat.

The lack of flat land is part of the problem with farming there, said Vince Matulich, who has put 250 acres into organic production the past three years. Controlling the water on the hills is a major and expensive problem, he said.

"With water going up \$20 an acre foot in the next five years, I won't be able to farm here," he said, referring to charges assessed by the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency.

"It would make a great park," said planning commissioner David Dodge.

The bottom line is Watsonville needs housing, said Omar James, attorney for Tai Associates. By the year 2005, studies estimate a need for 5,300 more homes, because



Michael McCollum

**Watsonville Planning Commission officials gather Monday around a map of the area near Lee Road the city is considering annexing.**

James said that 38 percent of Watsonville's population is under age 18.

"It's a big cultural issue," said Charles Eadie, interim planning director for the city. "Population demographics are driving growth all over the state and Watsonville is ahead of the curve. When you consider how many children per woman (will be born)..."

"It's not a racial issue — only a fact," James said. "Five thousand homes may be below what will be required."

While Dodge declined to comment on whether he thinks the Tai Property should be developed, he said he is frustrated about overcrowded housing and the conditions that accompany it, mentioning crime as one of his concerns.

"I don't think there is a lot of in-fill in the city limits, without building to really high density and I don't like that," Dodge said. "It causes ghettos."

Farmer Sam Earnshaw said he

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doesn't see how developing farm land into housing helps with the crime problem.

"There's been development in San Jose and L.A. and now (crime is) a bigger problem," Earnshaw said.

Eadie said the irony is that agriculture itself has created the overcrowding that everyone condemns.

According to the 1994 Farm Workers Housing Study, between 1983 and 1993 area farm labor increased from 5,500 to more than 12,000 workers.

"The shift from apples to row crops created the need for more labor. People moved in to farm. More ag land went into production," Eadie said. "Housing policies have not kept pace with growth."

Both Busch and Earnshaw acknowledge the city needs housing, especially for low-income families.

"Sure, we need housing," Earnshaw said. "This property's value is in the climate, the soils and the markets. Let's put (residents) somewhere else."

Busch said he wants to make sure that if the Tai Property is developed, it is for low-income housing and not big homes for wealthy people.

"The only justification for developing any part of it would be to provide very low-income housing. Any other way..." Busch said. "See that marsh harrier. It's a perfect example of a marsh species dependent on wetlands and uplands. If one disappears, it disappears."

The Planning Commission will meet Dec. 2 at 7 p.m. in City Council chambers to further discuss plans on a change of policy for the Tai Property. What's required to begin changing the property from farm use to urban development is an amendment to include the tract in the city's sphere of influence, Eadie said.

"It could still be shot down by the Coastal Commission, LAFCO — the City Council has to vote on it and it will need a biotic assessment though the county," he said. "It's a long way to go."