

Couple tries to halt Franich annexation

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✓ WATSONVILLE — Duane and Pattie Crawford don't regard themselves as gadflies, and the retirees know their latest effort to stop the Franich land annexation is both a longshot and a last shot.

At the same time, they're not giving up.

And because of their persistence, the city of Watsonville and owner Tony Franich must again seek final approval from the Local Agency Formation Committee (LAFCO) next month to have the 72-acre parcel off East Lake Avenue annexed to the city, clearing the way for the project to begin.

"It's a thin thread," Duane Crawford said Monday. "But we're just trying to keep it going as long as we can."

The Crawfords are hoping to change the mind of Gina Koshland, a LAFCO board member who has been part of a 3-2 LAFCO majority in favor of the project. She also has expressed misgivings about aspects of the project.

Gene Spencer, a local agronomist who largely has stayed out of the debate, is taking up the Crawfords' cause.

Spencer is sending a letter to Koshland contesting the statement by the project's proponents that the land has outlived its agricultural usefulness. He says he also will tell Koshland that in his professional opinion, the project would have a destructive effect on the Pajaro Valley and its agricultural industry.

The project, which would include housing, a school and a park, has been in the works for more than a decade.

Franich and the city on Feb. 10 gained what appeared to be final approval from LAFCO. But because the Crawfords filed an appeal, the issue must go before LAFCO again, on April 14.

LAFCO's executive director said he doesn't think the appeal will affect the Franich annexation.

"I fully expect the commission to make a final decision in April. All the speculation is over something that isn't going to happen," said Pat McCormick.

The Crawfords live in the Pajaro Village retirement community, across East Lake Drive from the proposed development. Duane Crawford, however, is a native of Palo Alto and lived in the Santa Clara Valley when it was an agricultural hub.

"It was just like driving here in Watsonville now," he said. "It was so pretty that they used to have blossom tours there every spring. But slowly that was destroyed."

"This (Franich land) is prime agricultural land, and we'd hate to see it (developed)."

The Crawfords, and others who

have opposed the full development, say a 36-acre project should be sufficient to provide the school, the park and the housing that the city needs without adding an estimated 2,000 vehicles to "bumper-to-bumper traffic at certain hours" that they say already exists on East Lake Avenue.

The Crawfords are asking for an outside study to determine the impact a 72-acre development would have on traffic in the area.

Spencer, a consultant who specializes in soils, is drafting a letter to Koshland urging that at least some of the Franich land be kept in agricultural use.

"They've tried for years to pass that property off as non-farmable land," Spencer said, "and that's just not the case. It's prime agricultural land. Being an agronomist for more than 30 years, I've tested soil all over the world, and I've got a pretty good idea of what's good soil and what's bad soil."

"It takes thousands of years for good soil to be developed, and the Pajaro Valley has some of the best soil in the world. It just can't be replaced."

Spencer also said he will tell Koshland that the effect of a 72-acre development will go far beyond the plot itself. He said it will mean a loss of agricultural jobs and more carbon monoxide in the air.

"Good soil acts like a sink for carbon monoxide," he said. "Fungi in the soil take the carbon monoxide out of the air. If 72 acres are taken away, that's thousands of pounds of carbon monoxide that will be put back in the air."

Enlisting Spencer's help is the latest anti-development effort by the Crawfords. Last year, they helped organize a petition drive that gathered about 1,500 signatures opposing the 72-acre project.

They're also trying to organize a rally.

"We just feel like we're not being represented by the government agencies that are making these decisions," Duane Crawford said.

Two LAFCO members — Gary Patton and Bob Garcia — are against the 72-acre project. Every LAFCO vote to date has been 3-2 in favor, with Ray Belgard, Mick Routh and Koshland making up the majority.

"I was very disappointed in our supervisor," Spencer said of Belgard, whose district includes the Franich property. "He said he was going to protect prime agricultural land when he ran for supervisor."

If the opponents can buy time beyond April 14, the picture could change dramatically. Routh's term expires after that meeting, and his replacement will come from the Santa Cruz City Council.

"That's another good reason for us to do this," Crawford said.