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Paving farmland for factories

Watsonville wants prime fields for industry

Watsonville - Annexation

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WATSONVILLE — Two streets named some 20 years ago — Industrial Drive and Harvest Drive — ironically capture the controversy over whether to build industry on top of farmland just down the road, in the city's south side.

At the corner of Riverside Drive and Highway 1 lies a field of strawberries — one of four parcels in that area slated for industry. That's according to the city of Watsonville's General Plan — a large document revised each decade or so that maps out where the city plans to grow, this time until 2005.

Combined, those 200 acres are among the most fertile in the world, and are in danger of being paved, for the very same reason: their location.

Flat lands near the Pajaro River were covered with layer upon layer of rich topsoil over the centuries as nutrient-rich river water spilled over its banks. This land also is in the path of breezes from the Monterey Bay, making it and other Watsonville soils ideal for growing strawberries and lettuce, high-value crops sensitive to warm climates.

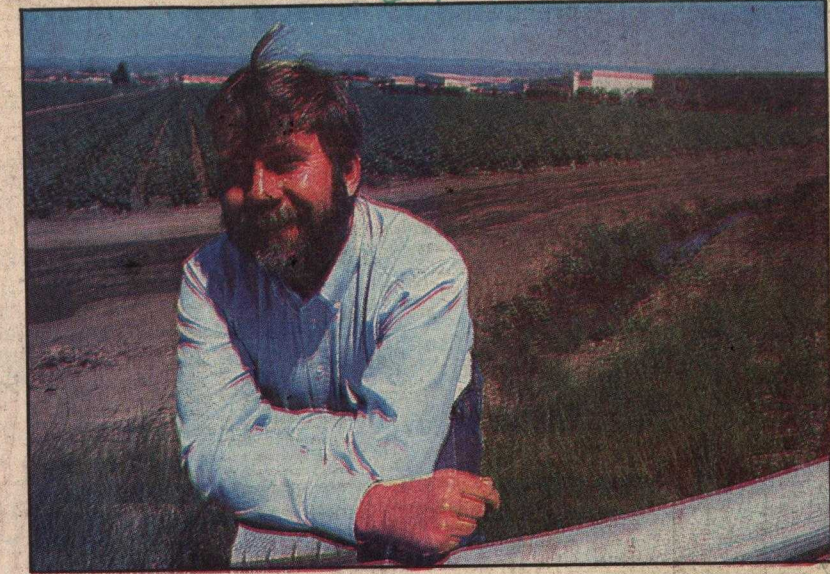
But the land's location also is its nemesis. It borders Highway 1 and edges up against the city's industrial area. All but one of the four

parcels are completely surrounded by city limits, and/or highway.

Location isn't the only reason Watsonville is looking at that site.

Watsonville, say those in charge of planning its future, has no place to grow. Not unless the city expands its limits by absorbing the prime farmland, wetlands or hills that surround it. And farmers, environmentalists and hillside residents are fighting their attempts.

But having no place to grow is also the fear of agriculture leaders, who say farmland annexations will have a domino effect and eat up



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

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County farm adviser Bill Ringe opposes the annexation.

Farmland for factories

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their farmland little by little. They look not far north, to the Santa Clara Valley, and point to the vast urban sprawl that replaces what used to be the largest fruit-growing county in California.

Assistant City Planner Charlie Eadie insists the city's first choice is not developing farmland. But, he said, "What we're doing today is alleviating some clearly unacceptable conditions."

Jobs, city leaders say, must be created to alleviate a 25 percent unemployment rate, and to accommodate future residents. But there are few vacant parcels left in the city to develop. The farmland under consideration is expected to yield 3,700 jobs, more than half those the city hopes to create in the next decade.

Also, he said, affordable housing is needed in a region where at least 2,000 families live in substandard or crowded housing.

Not only is the city forced to take care of the current residents, but must provide for the future. By 2005, the city is expected to grow to 50,500, based on a 1.8 percent growth rate each year.

And agriculture will continue bringing more workers, Eadie said. In 1980, there were some 5,700 farm workers listed in the county. By 1992, that number more than doubled to 12,000 workers, as growers began pulling out apples and other crops to plant higher-value strawberries, that require more labor. During the same period, Eadie said, crop value in Santa Cruz County more than doubled from \$114 million, to \$250 million last year.

"That tells me agriculture is booming, is generating a lot of growth and can afford to lose some land in the margins to accommodate that growth," Eadie said. "This is an industry that can absorb some loss of land. Not to say we want to do it, but if someone can come up with a different solution, they'd be a miracle worker."

Farmers bristle at the suggestion that their prime farmland is expendable, for any reason.

Kirk Schmidt of Quail Mountain Herbs and past county Farm Bureau president, said the city can't plan for a future, unknown population.

"It's misguided social policy, because we're going to convert the finest land in the country for unused, unproved social laws," said Schmidt, who also is an attorney.

"The problem with (the city's) argument is real simple. ... It's based on the fact that agriculture is an unlimited resource for development ... that there is no natural boundary for the city of Watsonville, that doesn't end at the highway or at Corralitos Creek," Schmidt said. "... The same rationale can justify the termination of all farmland. ... It's a unique resource, and it can't be duplicated anywhere else."

But selling that farmland is attractive to property owners, some who have had the farmland in their families for decades. Sold to a farmer, the land along Riverside and along West Beach is estimated at about \$20,000 to \$25,000 an acre. But that value multiplies 10 times when it is sold for development.

Watsonville isn't alone in its urban-or-agriculture dilemma. Each year, some 100,000 acres of farmland and rangeland in California are developed, according to California Farm Bureau spokesman Bob Krauter.

"That's the concern we have, that more and more of this land being pushed out of farming and paved over is some of our better farmland," Krauter said.

To date, farmers haven't made much noise, at least publicly, about the proposed annexations of the Manabe-Bergstrom, Resetar, Greenfarms Limited Partnership and the Sakata/Kett properties along Highway 1.

Perhaps that's because the annexation process for those sites is still in its infancy. Those parcels, as well as others the city is eyeing for expansion, still must be given approval to enter the development track. That preliminary level, called a "sphere of influence," is one city leaders hope to reach this

fall by the seven-member Local Agency Formation Commission.

But even if that land is put on that track, development is not assured, and can be a long way off. The 72-acre Franich property off East Lake Avenue, for example, was first included in the city's "sphere," or development track in the late 1960s. Only last year did it become part of the city, after a bitter 13-year annexation battle by land owner Tony Franich.

Perhaps agriculture leaders have been more focused in recent years on the Franich property, much closer to being paved.

Now that Franich has been lost, they're turning to the four parcels — two that straddle Highway 1 north of Riverside Drive, and two a bit further north above the railroad tracks — that combined are almost three times the size of the Franich property.

And farmers say this new battle is far from over.

This month, the county's Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission, led by chairman Bill Ringe, asked the county Board of Supervisors to formally oppose Watsonville's attempt to annex prime farmland. Supervisors have voted to give no opinion until their planning staff further studies the matter.

But Ringe said the advisory commission vows to continue public discussion.

And on Friday, the UC Cooperative Extension office will sponsor a forum on farmland conversion. UC Davis farm advisers will lead the discussion, and supply participants with the book "Losing Ground: What Should We Do About California Disappearing Rural Lands?"

"We understand the city needs to grow residentially and industrially — we're just saying not here (on prime farmland)," Ringe said.

Eadie said the city has tried accommodating farmers' concerns. It was the county Farm Bureau, Eadie said, that first suggested the city look to a wetlands area west of Highway 1 for residential development.

The area, known as the Tai prop-

erty west of Lee Road, would take the place of 200 acres of farmland slated for development south of Corralitos Creek and next to East Lake Avenue. But challenges by the Watsonville Wetlands Watch forced the City Council to postpone development plans for the 500-acre Lee Road property, until an environmental impact report is completed. The \$42,000 report, paid for by Tai property owners, is expected out in September, Eadie said.

But still, that land would be slated for homes, not industry like the parcels near Riverside and Beach Road.

Ringe and others said they don't buy the city's concern that large industry, which provides higher-paying wages and creates related jobs, won't come to Watsonville because there aren't large industrial parcels left in the city to develop.

Ringe points to the city of Hollister, which this spring stole two major businesses from Watsonville — Marich Confections and West Marine's distribution center. Land costs there are about five times higher than in Watsonville. Ringe argues that even if larger parcels of industrial land are added to Watsonville, land prices will still be high. The difference, Ringe said, is that the city also charges higher development fees than those paid in Hollister.