

✓ Franich annexation gets final approval

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SANTA CRUZ — Tony Franich's 12-year quest to have 72 acres of his property annexed to Watsonville ended in success Thursday.

If a movie were to be made about the last episode in the saga, it could be called "Double Indemnity." It also wouldn't be likely to have a sequel.

Santa Cruz County's Local Agency Formation Commission voted 3-2 to give final approval to the annexation, after being assured by Franich and by the city of Watsonville that they would assume any legal expenses that might result from lawsuits.

Afterward, LAFCO voted unanimously to accept the offer by Franich, 82, and the city of Watsonville to indemnify it.

Bob Garcia and County Supervisor Gary Patton voted no on the proposal, as they did in February when the annexation proposal first was approved, and on several previous occasions. Because an appeal was filed after the February decision, LAFCO was obliged to reconsider.

Thursday's vote clears the way for parts of the parcel, off East Lake Avenue, to be sold. The Pajaro Valley Unified School District wants to buy part for a school, and Franich is donating some land to the city with the proviso that low-cost housing and a park named after the Franich family be built there.

The parcel, primarily farmland, had been unincorporated county land. For it to be developed, the city had to annex it. It has been illegal since 1978 to develop county land that is zoned agricultural.

Construction probably is years away, because no development plan has been put forth.

Thursday, residents of adjacent retirement communities repeated their long-standing plea to the board to reject or scale down the annexation. County Farm Bureau president Kirk Schmidt and others spoke of the loss of prime farm land. James Nagamine, who owns a nursery that adjoins the property, said his business would be endangered if future neighbors complain about noise from the boiler he uses to heat the roses grown in his greenhouses.

Both Patton and Garcia warned that this could be the first step toward urbanizing the heretofore-rural Pajaro Valley.

"Pretty soon the Pajaro Valley will look like the

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Santa Clara Valley," Garcia warned.

"I don't think this city intends to draw a tight urban line," Patton said. "I think it intends to sprawl, and I think we should make that part of the overall decision."

Patton also questioned whether the city of Watsonville could be held to the letter of its memorandum of understanding with Franich. That memorandum spells out the specific development plans.

Watsonville City Manager Steve Salomon told Patton that it was possible the plans could be changed, and Patton indicated a desire to get a formal commitment from the city to stay within its stated developmental parameters.

He was told changes in the memorandum are not within LAFCO's or the county's jurisdiction.

The implication that the city and Franich had plans for the parcel that they haven't disclosed elicited an angry response from Franich.

"Frankly, I had no intention of getting up here," he said. "But if I have to sit here and listen to people impugn the integrity and the honesty of the Franich family, that's too much for me."

Voting yes were Ray Belgard, a county supervisor whose district includes Watsonville, Scotts Valley Mayor Gina Koshland and Capitola Vice-Mayor Mick Routh.

After the public hearing was closed, Belgard said no new evidence had been presented.

Koshland, who had been considered the potential

"swing" vote, stayed on the aye side, although she expressed concerns about the size of the buffer zone between the surrounding farmland and the development.

Routh added, "I don't see this as the end of agriculture in the Pajaro Valley. Concerns (about specifics) are most appropriately addressed by the Watsonville City Council, and I think there has to be an element of trust with the city of Watsonville."

That comment drew sarcastic laughter from certain members of the audience, which numbered about 40. Emotions have run high on the annexation since it first was proposed in 1982, and so have the legal bills on both sides.

A previous suit made it to the state Supreme Court, forcing Franich to start over on the annexation. One speaker Thursday shouted at LAFCO members that if they didn't find out how the annexation would affect the city financially, "you will be sued."

While most of those who spoke Thursday expressed displeasure with the proposal, Patricia Carlos, defended Franich's right to sell his land and questioned the legitimacy of the opponents' claims.

"I didn't hear anyone crying out against developing ag land in the 1960s when *their* homes were built on ag land," she said. "It didn't bother them then because they gained from it. And everybody likes to talk about human rights. Well, Mr. Franich has human rights. He's done a great deal for this valley and he's paid more than his share of taxes. The next generation of his family doesn't want to go into farming, and all he wants to do is get everything settled for his family."