

Disputed apple orchard annexation is on LAFC agenda Wednesday

A controversial request by the city of Watsonville to annex a 72-acre apple orchard on East Lake Avenue will be considered by the Local Agency Formation Commission when it meets Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. in room 525 of the County Center on Ocean Street.

The proposal to annex the lands owned by Attorney Anthony Franich is part of the current rift between some county supervisors and the Watsonville City Council. Supervisor Gary Patton, in particular, has criticized the city for trying to develop agricultural lands.

Patton is a member of the five-member LAFC group, along with fellow liberal supervisor, Robley Levy. The third member of the Board of Supervisor's liberal majori-

ty, Joe Cucchiara, is an alternate member of the commission.

Pat McCormick, executive director of the commission, said the proposal doesn't conform with the county general plan policy against developing prime agricultural lands.

However, Franich and others contend the land isn't particularly "prime" for agricultural use.

In a letter to commissioners, Franich said the soil on the 72 acres isn't suitable for lettuce or other specialty row crops. The apples from the old orchard also aren't suitable for marketing.

He also claimed that many of the trees were damaged by flooding this past winter and that it would cost \$500,000 to replant the orchard.

But despite Franich's claims, McCormick is recommending the commission reduce the size of the annexation to 19 acres so that most of the site will remain in agricultural production.

This 19 acres could then be developed with houses and a road could be built which would separate the farmland from the homes, he said.

McCormick is also suggesting the commission recommend that Franich enter into a Williamson Act contract with the county to guarantee the remaining 53 acres be kept in agricultural use for at least 10 years.

The environmental impact report on the city's request noted if the 72 acres were annexed and subsequently developed, an estimated 358 housing units could be built there for a population of about 935 persons.

McCormick also noted in his analysis of the request that annexation of the full 72 acres could also open up development of agricultural lands to the north and east of the Franich property.

However, he said, one benefit to annexing the lands would be the fact that Franich would help pay for part of a storm drain to solve flooding problems in the Bay Village/Pajaro Village residential area to the southeast.

The Sentinel

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