

LAFCO hears public comment

Land expansion hearing draws over 300

By VICTORIA MANLEY
STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Residents from around the area filled the Lakeview Middle School gymnasium Wednesday night and got their opportunity to air their views on a controversial land-use proposal made by the city.

The public hearing held by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) drew approximately 350 farmers, environmentalists, field workers, business executives, city officials and others who live and work in Watsonville who expressed opposing opinions on the city's proposal to add more than 700

acres to its "sphere of influence," a boundary outside of city limits which marks territory for future growth.

The proposal outlines six areas to be included, totaling 733 acres. Though the largest area proposed is 300 acres off Buena Vista Drive, the most controversial parcel is 219 acres of prime farmland off Riverside Drive near the southwest corner of the city.

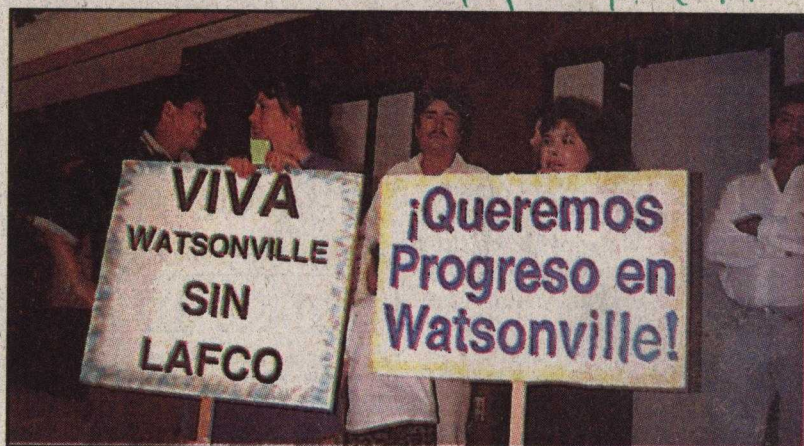
Though the hearing was equally balanced in speaker representation, attendees used other methods to grab attention. Banners and flags were carried and hung on the gym walls, and paper badges were distributed that read, "Viva Watsonville" and "Save Farmland."

City officials and other annexation supporters said the town needs this annexation to create jobs — that without more jobs, the city will die. Opponents said LAFCO needs to prevent the annexation in order to preserve prime farmland — that without the one commodity rare to the area, the city will die.



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Community activist Dan Miller (left) sits next to Joanne Lynch and Dick Peixoto, all opposed to the annexation proposal, in a crowded gymnasium of more than 300 people at LAFCO's public hearing Wednesday.



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Members of the community came to the hearing carrying flags, banners and paper badges proclaiming their stances. This group shows their support for the annexation with signs reading "Long live Watsonville without LAFCO," and "We want progress in Watsonville."

Only about 45 people out of 72 who signed up had the opportunity to speak due to time constraints, which prompted LAFCO to continue the public hearing to their next meeting on Oct. 1.

Members of the Watsonville City Council, the Santa Cruz County Business Council, and various city officials urged the commission to consider the annexation as a city

revival. They gave the need for revenue, public safety, better public health and opportunities for future generations as reasons why the proposal should be approved.

Councilwoman Betty Bobeda said the financial status of the city is low, primarily because it is in industrial competition with Hollister and Salinas.

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She stated the city supply of land is inadequate, and that "approving this annexation will not lead to urban sprawl," a consequence opponents fear most, and that "agricultural land will be here as long as farmers want it."

Watsonville police Chief Terry Medina warned that if more jobs are not created in Watsonville, the city will see a "negative spiral" take place in the community — he said that jobs make improvements in people, and that without them violence and drug use will increase. "You have the opportunity to do something about poverty and safety in your area," he said.

Others opposed paving over prime farmland — called by some the best in the nation — and argued that doing so will not necessarily create jobs. Resident Ed Davidson called the proposal a "Field of Dreams," arguing the proposal hopes "once you zone it, they will come — I'm not so sure about that." Resident Mary Anne Martinez called the proposal "economically, socially and environmentally

foolish," and a "very shortsighted solution to our problems of high unemployment."

Local growers such as Dick Peixoto and Nita Gizdich and members of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau argued that Watsonville's one capital, agriculture, will be depleted with the farm acreage lost.

Other speakers urged the commission to postpone their decision, to call for an election by the people or to negotiate with the city over the proposal. Last week, such a negotiation was proposed by LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick, whose suggested annexation was about half the amount requested. Of the 733 acres requested, McCormick recommended that only 355 acres be added, completely objecting to three areas of the proposed annexation.

After hearing all public opinion, LAFCO will decide whether to approve, amend or deny the proposal. Though the panel announced last night they will reach a decision in 70 days, McCormick said LAFCO is not concerned with the deadline. "We could take 90 days if we want... Nobody really cares," he said.