

Watsonville proposal moves forward

Watsonville - Annexation

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✓ WATSONVILLE — Councilman Daniel Dodge officially launched a campaign Monday to put a measure to expand city boundaries on the Nov. 6 ballot.

If approved by city voters, Watsonville would move forward with an attempt to annex 80 acres of farmland east of Highway 1 between West Beach Street and Riverside Drive, known as the Sakata-Kett property, and 15 acres west of Highway 1, encompassing a Chevron station and the historic Redman-Hirahara House.

To get the measure on the ballot, Dodge must collect the signatures of 1,504 registered voters — 10 percent of the electorate — and he'll have less than a month to do it.

"It's happening. It's going forward," said Dodge, who is acting outside his official capacity. The short timeline will test the strength of the support for the question, he said.

Watsonville's interest in the properties dates to the 1990s, but attempts to fold them into the city failed in the face of opposition from a majority on the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees annexations in the county. LAFCO could remain a hurdle, even if the measure makes it to the ballot and city voters approve it.

There will be opposition. Chris Enright, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau has said his organization will "actively campaign against it." Supervisor Greg Caput, who represents Watsonville, has expressed reservations, as well.

Dodge's initiative is a first step. It would amend a 2002 voter-approved measure that limited Watsonville's expansion through 2027. While the 2002 Measure U allowed Watsonville to annex the 95-acre Manabe-Ow property off Ohlone Parkway on the city's west side, it took Sakata-Kett off the table.

Dodge and other city officials say times have changed, and the new annexation proposal is needed because Watsonville's long-standing economic problems have been made worse by the recession.

Dodge envisions a retail development on Sakata-Kett to bring jobs and sales tax revenue to pay for municipal services in a time of budget cutbacks. Officials say property will be easier to develop than Manabe-Ow, which requires expensive infrastructure and is limited by deed restrictions.

Dodge said he hasn't heard anyone come up with another plan to address Watsonville's economic woes.

"The status quo is unacceptable for the health and vitality of our community," he said.

The city attorney has 15 days to review Dodge's notice of intent to circulate petitions, but City Clerk Beatriz Flores said the measure could be returned to Dodge sooner, possibly this week. Flores said to meet a county deadline for ballot measures in August she would need signed petitions returned by June 4 to allow time to check signatures and prepare a report for the July 10 City Council meeting.