

Annexation conditions set for Watsonville

Agency modifies requirements, denies request for more time

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SANTA CRUZ — In the end, the city of Watsonville went down without much of a fight.

While city officials sat quietly, the Local Agency Formation Commission on Wednesday ratified three conditions to be placed on the city before granting the city's request to add 94 acres on Riverside Drive and 250 acres off Buena Vista Drive to the city. While the conditions were toned down somewhat from their original version, the intent remains basically the same.

The city still can't expand west of Highway 1 without first allowing the California Coastal Commission to review the proposal to ensure it complies with the Coastal Act. The city is also required to get approval from the county to expand west. The other two conditions were also slightly altered, but only to allow the city more control in the land-use process.

An expected plea from the city

for relief from the conditions did not materialize. Only Vice Mayor Dennis Osmer spoke on behalf of the city, and he asked only for a continuance because City Councilman and LAFCO member Lowell Hurst was unable to attend Wednesday's meeting at the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz.

The commission voted to proceed with ratification of the conditions, 4-3, with Capitola City Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan filling in for Hurst, who said he was taking a state examination and could not break free to attend the meeting.

"I'm sorry I couldn't attend," Hurst said later. "When most applicants request a continuance, they usually get it. I guess they had the agenda already decided."

Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt moved to adopt the conditions and then offered slight amendments to each of the three. The revised conditions were adopted.

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ed 5-1, with Harlan casting the lone no vote. Commissioner Ray Belgard left the meeting early and did vote on the motion to adopt the conditions.

The conditions say:

- The city will study the industrial potential of the Landmark property and if it can be developed the city will "consider" rezoning the area from residential to industrial. The original condition said the city "will" rezone the area if the potential exists.

- The city will evaluate the Pajaro Valley Futures Project and adopt any of its recommendations the city deems relevant. The project must be complete by June 1, 1998 — which was added by Wormhoudt. The city can not apply to have any land annexed until the study is complete.

- Any Watsonville annexation requests west of Highway 1 must comply with the California Coastal Act and be reviewed by the Coastal Commission and the county. LAFCO won't process the application unless all three agencies concur. This condition may be adopted as part of LAFCO policy countywide.

"To me, the intent of the conditions remains the same," Wormhoudt said. "But I certainly did take seriously the concerns raised by the city. ... I tried to be responsible to their legitimate concerns."

Once the Futures study is complete, the city can apply to have 94 acres of prime farmland at Riverside Drive and Highway 1 annexed, as well as 250 acres on Buena Vista Drive. At its Oct. 1 meeting, LAF-

'I'm not sure what the city's going to do.'

— Charlie Eadie, planner

CO voted those parcels into the city's sphere of influence, a necessary step in the annexation process.

The city will most likely apply to LAFCO for reconsideration of the entire sphere of influence request, though, including all 219 acres at Riverside Drive and Highway 1. Beyond that, it seems likely either the city or the landowners snubbed by LAFCO will attempt to take the case to court.

The city obviously did not want the conditions to be adopted Wednesday. More time was needed to prepare a response to the conditions, Osmer told the commission. Plus Hurst wasn't there, and he's been a major supporter of the annexation proposal.

"My intent is to try to smooth this out," Osmer told the commission in asking for a continuance. "We both want to get something done, and I don't believe we'll have to go to court to do it."

Later in the meeting, when it became clear that the majority of the commission wanted to move forward despite the city's request to postpone, he added: "There's a good side to the city; we don't always act badly. What we need

most is time."

Osmer also suggested two subcommittees be formed, one from the city and the other from LAFCO, to attempt to iron out the situation. As far as the majority of the commission was concerned, however, nothing needed to be ironed out.

LAFCO Chairman Roger Anderson said no matter what, the city was going to have to live with conditions on any additions made to its boundaries. He said by not fully studying already vacant land in the city limits, the city set itself up for this.

"Infill is something Watsonville dropped the ball on completely," Anderson said. "It's important that they look at that."

They're now required to look at it, and even develop it if possible.

Wormhoudt said the city's strategy was clearly to try to delay the vote on the conditions. City staff did not even address the commission, except for city attorney Alan Smith — who only quibbled on a couple of points in the conditions that were adopted anyway.

Interim City Manager Carlos Palacios did not lead a fight on the city's behalf, as some expected. He did not return phone calls Wednesday afternoon seeking comment on his silence.

"It's difficult to stand up there on the spot and try to negotiate something in the middle of a meeting," assistant city planner Charlie Eadie said. "That was the whole reason for (Osmer's) suggestion to form subcommittees. Now we have to go back to the council. I'm not sure what the city's going to do."