

Land deal OK'd

Watsonville finally secures 90-acre parcel

Watsonville Annexation

By DONNA JONES

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SANTA CRUZ — Lisa Dobbins, the executive director of Action Pajaro Valley, had just one word when, after a decade of trying, Watsonville finally received the go-ahead Wednesday to annex roughly 90 acres on its western edge.

"Wow!" Dobbins exclaimed, after the unanimous vote by the Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission.

The long struggle to annex the property has reshaped city politics, and the victory opens the door to new economic possibilities.

Action Pajaro Valley, a non-profit land-use advisory group, was born from a failed attempt to annex the property in the late 1990s. The idea was to bring together various interest groups — farm-

ers, business people, environmentalists, developers and elected officials — to craft a compromise on future city growth.

The effort resulted in Measure U, a ballot initiative approved by city voters in 2002 that spells out where the city can grow, and the unprecedented coalition of support for the Manabe-Burgstrom proposal when it came before LAFCO in October.

The city wants the land so that private interests can develop a business park, and, hopefully, create at least 2,000 new jobs.

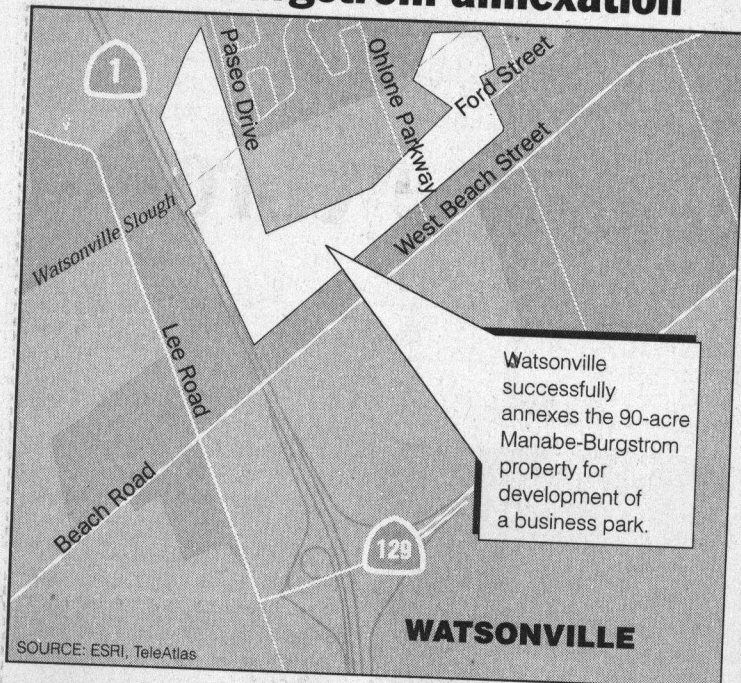
Some LAFCO commissioners were concerned the property



WORMHOUDT

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Manabe-Burgstrom annexation



Max DeNike/Sentinel graphic

Land

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would be used to build more housing like that in subdivisions constructed nearby in recent years or for a shopping center filled with big-box stores, such as Wal-Mart.

The L-shaped tract near Highway 1 and West Beach Street is now used for growing strawberries and lettuce.

The approval Wednesday included a legally binding agreement that bans from the site until 2030 large retailers and auto sales, as well as housing on all but about 5 acres. The city also promised to restore 25 acres of wetlands.

City Manager Carlos Palacios, who also is co-chairman of Action Pajaro Valley, has been working on the annexation since he took over the helm at the city nine years ago. The unanimous vote was gratifying, he said.

"For the city it's great to see the economic development that's going to happen," Palacios said.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, who sits on LAFCO, noted the "striking difference" between current support for the proposal and the contentious divisions in the community the last time around. She credited Action Pajaro Valley for creating a climate of cooperation that couldn't be denied.

"I don't like the loss of agricultural land, and I'm not entirely convinced ... that all the land will be needed (between now and 2030)," Wormhoudt said Wednesday. "But I don't think my personal opinion should be the basis of this decision. I do believe we have a proposal that reflects the sentiment in Watsonville."

William Ow, a member of the family that owns part of the

Manabe-Burgstrom property, said it's too early to tell exactly how the land will be developed since there's a lot to be done before any building can take place, including working through a city planning process that will decide details such as how the property will be carved up and where roads will go. Any project will be market driven and what's in demand now might not be the same thing needed two or three years down the line, he said.

Wednesday's action was somewhat anti-climatic. In October, dozens of community members packed a LAFCO hearing on the annexation at the Pajaro Valley Unified School District office, and more than 40 spoke in favor of the proposal. The commission gave tentative approval then, pending the creation of the agreement to restrict development. Wednesday, only a scattering of people were in the county supervisors chamber in Santa Cruz to witness the vote.

Nor did city leaders get to bask in the glow of victory for very long.

A few minutes after the vote, the Watsonville Pilots Association took aim in what is expected to be the next city annexation proposal: 400 acres on and around Buena Vista Road.

During a presentation before LAFCO, pilots said city plans to build hundreds of homes in the area would compromise the safety of pilots and people on the ground, as well as create noise conflicts between the airport and new neighborhoods.

"We're asking you to step in and prevent the city from making this mistake," said John Cowan of the pilots group.

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