

Franich annexation ruling postponed

Panel decides
it wants to wait
for Watsonville
growth plan

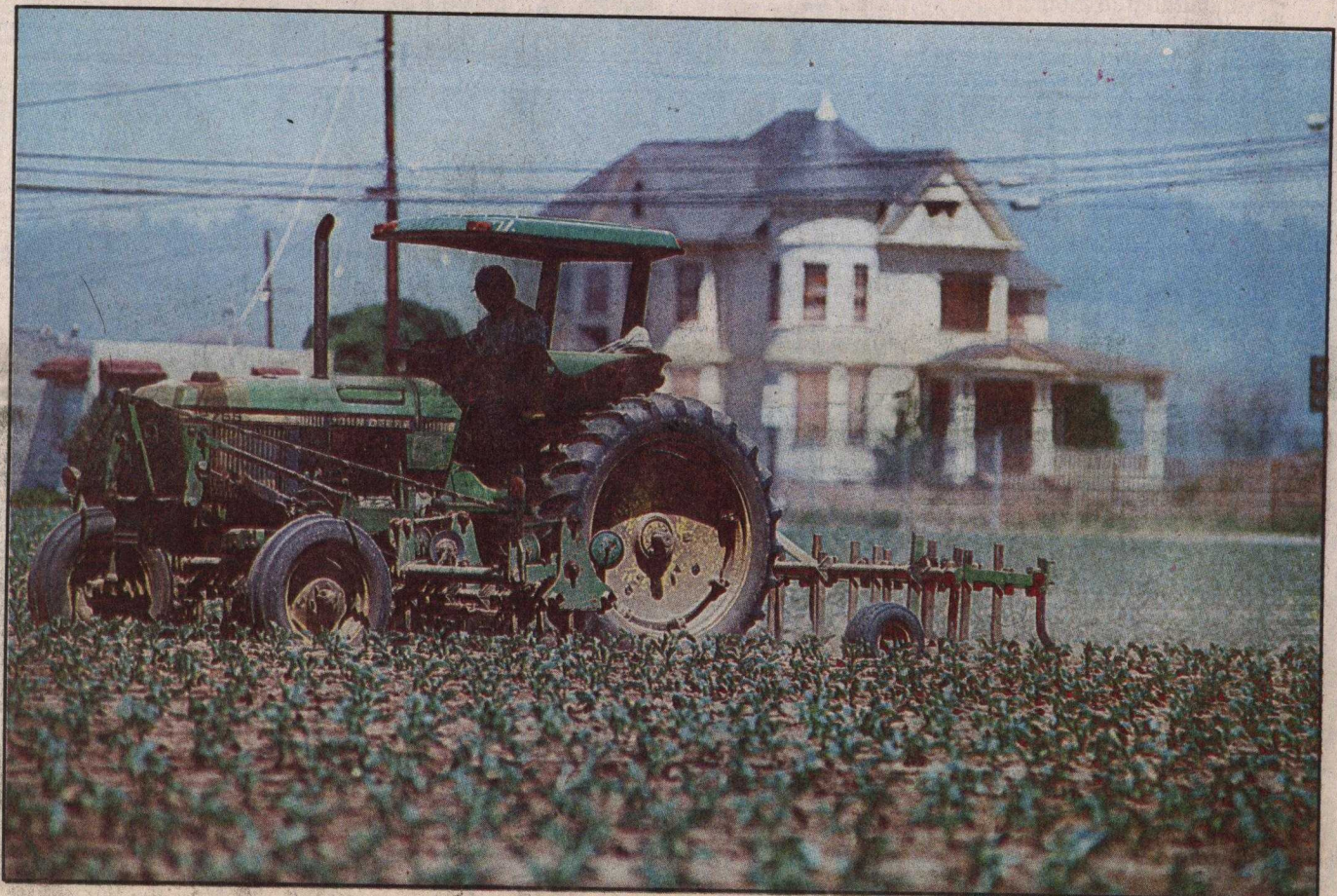
By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — After 12 years of debate over whether the city should annex the Franich property on East Lake Avenue, the county's Local Agency Formation Commission voted Monday to delay its decision until it sees Watsonville's completed plan for future growth.

City officials said that plan may not be ready until early next year.

By a 4-1 vote, commissioners agreed to ask Watsonville officials to present their general plan by July 28 before they decide whether to allow the city to include the prime agricultural land, owned by Tony Franich, within its city limits.

LAFCO had agreed to rule on the annexation by July 19. Watsonville must agree to extend the decision date to July 28, or LAFCO must rule without seeing



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A tractor works the 74 acres owned by Tony Franich that have been the focus of a 12 year battle.

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Franich

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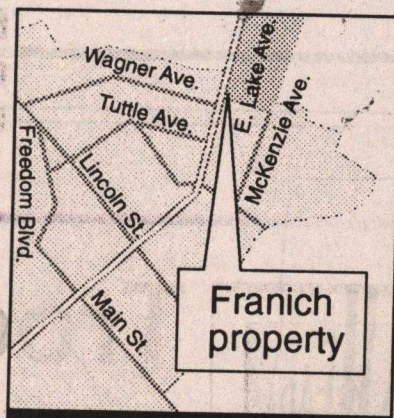
the general plan.

Commissioner Ray Belgard, who represents the Watsonville area on the county Board of Supervisors, voted to annex the property and "get on with it."

After listening to more than two hours of public testimony pitting the value of saving prime agriculture land and farm jobs against the city's dire need for the affordable housing offered as part of the Franich package, commissioners Gina Koshland, Gary Patton, Michael Routh and Robert Garcia said they wanted assurances that the annexation would not begin a wave of development on farm land.

"If this commission supports the Franich property, I want to be sure that there are safeguards met, (so that it's) not a stepping stone to development in the Pajaro Valley," said Commissioner Michael Routh, who also is vice mayor of Capitola.

"I can't decide if the Franich land would allow for orderly



Sentinel map

growth if I don't know what the plan for orderly growth is going to be," Commissioner Garcia said.

Belgard argued that the property lies next to the East Lake Village shopping center. It has power, sewer and other necessities close by to develop the low-income housing, school and park Franich has pro-

posed for the land, along with market-rate housing. None of the other areas being considered for city growth offer that, he said.

"What makes you think the landowner's going to do what (Franich) is willing to donate?" Belgard said.

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios, who spoke at this hearing and at one in May, said he was disappointed but not surprised that commissioners hedged on deciding the fate of the property.

He said he disagreed with LAFCO that annexing the Franich land could start a domino effect in South County. The land has been studied carefully and considered part of the city's growth since the 1960s.

Rios said he believes City Council members will hold LAFCO to their original agreement to decide by July 19.

"By law they have to make a decision — the ball's in their court," Rios said.