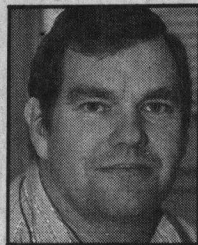


Annexation strategies face further debate

By TRACY L. BARNETT
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WATSONVILLE — Now that they've taken the first step in the annexation of 216 acres of prime farmland straddling Highway 1, Watsonville City Council members must wrestle with a strategy to win the Local Agency Formation Commission to their point of view.



Osmer

The council approved a pre-zoning of the ag land to planned industrial after five hours of discussion Tuesday night. Whether to take the proposed annexation a bite at a time, or to go for the entire pie — that's the question they

must address in two weeks at the next council meeting.

Councilman Dennis Osmer, who opposed the annexation of the entire 216 acres, proposed a compromise late Tuesday night that exhausted council members backed away from: Apply to the Local Agency Formation Commission to annex a section east of Highway 1 and north of West Beach Street, aggressively pursue industry that would hire local workers and put the rest of the project on hold.

"It's better to just take a bite than to have LAFCO slap the whole thing out of our mouth," Osmer said Wednesday. "It takes it out of the field-of-dreams category. It's real; you can get a letter of intent from one of those 160 companies coming in and expressing an interest. It gives

us time to train people, develop the infrastructure; there are a lot of advantages in doing it that way."

Osmer intends to pursue the concept with local business people, particularly those who have expressed an interest in expanding in the area.

Bruce Woolpert of Granite Rock Co. told the council Tuesday night that his company will be looking to expand soon. His company is located next to the parcel Osmer identified.

If the council had gone for annexation of only that tract in the first place, said Bill Parkin, an attorney representing a group that is suing the city to stop the annexation, the group may have been willing to drop the lawsuit. While his cli-

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ents are concerned about the loss of quality farmland, he said, the chief emphasis has been on lands west of Highway 1. Now, however, Parkin said, that's water under the bridge.

"If last night Lowell Hurst had stood up and said, 'Let's go for a scaled-down rezoning,' maybe we could have accepted that," said Parkin. "But they demonstrated with their vote last night that they're going for the whole thing. It's naive for anybody to think they're not."

Other council members insist that the city should go before the Local Agency Formation Commission with the entire 216 acres.

"My hunch is in order to get something, you have to ask for more than you need," said Council-

man Lowell Hurst, who is also a member of LAFCO. "If it was a perfect world we could precisely indicate what we need and hope that we would perhaps get it. But it's important from the standpoint of the businessman and industrialist and the folks that provide jobs that we have an adequate reserve, adequate space for future growth."

Pat McCormick, LAFCO's executive director, said the agency may wish to see more than the Riverside Drive annexation proposal, but is likely to want a "big picture" view of the city's overall annexation plan.

If the agency decides to place the annexation on the fast track, it could be decided as early as this fall, said McCormick. But the last major annexation of farmland — the Franich property on the east

side of town — took 13 years, and it is still under agricultural production.

"It's very hard to get ... business (owners) to commit themselves when they don't know what's going to happen there," said Councilman Oscar Rios, who favors bringing the whole group of parcels to LAFCO at once. "LAFCO has a history of no annexations. If it took 13 years to annex Franich and nothing has been done there ... what do you think business is going to say?"

The council will hold another public hearing at its next council meeting, July 23, on the best way to proceed with the annexation. At that point, it is expected to direct staff to come back with a specific proposal that the council can adopt and send along to LAFCO for approval.