

Proposed Plaza clears hurdle

By Malia Spencer/Senior staff writer

The developers of Orcutt Plaza cleared a key hurdle Thursday when a regional commission unanimously approved their property's annexation into Santa Maria, but people living within the annexation zone will now get their say.

The Santa Barbara County Local Agency Formation Commission voted 7-0 to allow the annexation of nearly 60 acres just south of the southern city limit, near the Santa Maria Way exit of Highway 101.

After hearing public testimony both for and against the annexation, Commission Chairman Joe Centeno, who represents Santa Maria on the county Board of Supervisors, told the audience that despite Thursday's vote the final decision is yet to be made.

"Ultimately, the people are the ones who are going to make the final call," he said, alluding to the next public hearing that must be held.

The next step in the annexation process is a protest hearing that will be called by LAFCO staff in the coming weeks or months, agency executive director Bob Braitman told the board.

Registered voters and land owners in the annexation area will be notified by mail of that hearing date, he said. He stressed that any protest received by the agency prior to the notification of the protest hearing will not count, so he urged residents to wait until they receive the notice before lodging their formal opposition.

The Local Agency Formation Commission is a state agency that regulates local government and service boundaries. Its board members include county, city, special service district and public members.

Seven people spoke Thursday against the annexation application, but only three said they lived within the annexation area. Those residents cited concerns about increased traffic, noise and lights due to the development of Orcutt Plaza.

The annexation paves the way for the construction of the proposed 225,000-square-foot Orcutt Plaza shopping center on property owned by the Adam family at the corner of Santa Maria Way and College Drive.

Orcutt Plaza has been the subject of debate for years after the county approved the project in June 2003, on the 22-acre site known in the Orcutt Community Plan as Key Site 25.

As one of the commercially zoned areas within the Orcutt Community Plan, the property has the potential to generate revenue for the unincorporated community - making it a high-profile loss, said Jennifer Weston-Larsen, with the Orcutt Area Advisory Group.

She told the commission the Orcutt Area Advisory Group opposes the annexation because it "violates policies and provisions of the Orcutt Community Plan" and is "detrimental to future self-governance."

The original project, though approved, has been delayed indefinitely because the developer lacks the water needed to build. According to the Orcutt Community Plan, no development can occur unless the

developer finds a source of water other than groundwater.

Many residential developments buy water from Santa Maria, but the city has refused to sell water to the Adam family for commercial development in Orcutt. If people purchase items outside the city, the sales tax on those products goes to the county, not the city.

Deborah Brasket, executive director of Santa Barbara County Action Network, said her organization shared the concerns of the Orcutt Area Advisory Group and also opposes the annexation.

She added that she is also concerned that the “motives to refuse water sales (to the original project) is not in the best interest of county residents” and may be rooted in “interagency rivalry.”

The refusal of city officials to sell water for Orcutt Plaza drew much discussion Thursday, but Centeno, a former mayor of Santa Maria, Commissioner Marty Mariscal, a former Santa Maria councilman, and Commissioner Bob Orach, a current Santa Maria councilman, all defended the city's action.

City rate payers paid to bring costly state water to the valley, Centeno said, and others, such as Orcutt, refused.

“When this came to the city ... asking for city water, (the City Council) has to decide whether to sell taxpayer water,” he said. “This case is commercial, and the city felt to sell (water) to commercial (development) it would be detrimental to commercial (businesses) within the city.”

To make the 22-acre Orcutt Plaza site contiguous to the city limits - a requirement of annexation - other pieces of property must be added as well.

The Adam family owns a five-acre site adjacent to Sunrise Hills, which is the northern boundary of the annexation application, and the Orcutt Plaza site on the southern end. Sandwiched between the two Adam family properties are the 115-unit Quail Meadows West mobile home park, the 96-unit Quail Meadows Condominiums, and a Chevron gas station.

Though there was opposition, three people who live in the annexation area spoke in favor of the proposal, which Dave Cross, an Adam family representative, said is encouraging.

After the meeting, Cross said he is optimistic that residents will approve the annexation.

The protest hearing process is expected to begin in about 30 days with the mailing of notices to registered voters and land owners within the annexation zone, Braitman said.

If protests are received from 25 percent or more of the voters who are registered at addresses within the annexation zone, then an election would be required, Braitman said.

If protests are received from 50 percent or more of those registered voters, then the process would stop and the annexation would be stopped, he said. If fewer than 25 percent of the registered voters protest, then the annexation goes forward.

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