

A proposed 2,400-home expansion of Riverbank to the west has raised concerns from a key official in the approval process.

The concerns are listed in a May 15 letter to the city from Sara Lytle-Pinhey, executive director of the Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission. She said that the River Walk project would consume prime farmland and that the city has enough home sites within its current boundaries for now.

The proposal is still undergoing the required study of environmental impacts, including traffic, water, farmland and other concerns. It eventually would go before the Riverbank Planning Commission for a recommendation on how the City Council should vote.

The final step would be LAFCO, which rules on annexations to cities in Stanislaus County. Lytle-Pinhey and her staff would analyze the proposal in detail for the five voting members. Two of them are county supervisors, Vito Chiesa and Terry Withrow. Two are mayors, Richard O'Brien of Riverbank and Amy Bublak of Turlock. Ken Lane represents the general public.

Riverbank would grow to McHenry

River Walk would take up about two-thirds of a 1,522-acre annexation bounded by McHenry Avenue, Patterson Road and the Stanislaus River. The rest would be deferred for future development decisions.

The western city limit is now roughly halfway between Coffee and Oakdale roads.

Lytle-Pinhey's letter was attached as "informational correspondence" to the LAFCO agenda for Wednesday, May 22. Members cannot yet vote, but they did hear from several River Walk opponents during the public comment period required for all government meetings in California.

They said River Walk would be built on farm soil especially well-suited to groundwater recharge during storms. Jeani Ferrari of Turlock, who chairs the Farmland Working Group, urged "infill" development rather than sprawl for Riverbank.

"This amazing resource, some of the world's most productive farmland, should not be paved over if we have not first built in, built up and grown sustainably," she said.

Supporters cite housing shortage

River Walk supporters have said it would help ease the area's housing shortage with a mix of single-family houses and apartments. A small part would be "mixed-use," where homes sit amid businesses. The site would have extensive trails and wildlife protections on the bluff overlooking the river.

A project consultant addressed the farmland issue during a February presentation to the City Council. Engineer David Romano said housing often requires losing farmland, but the county will require protection of a like amount elsewhere. He also said farmers have become efficient at using the land that is available.

"All of this needs to be balanced," Romano said. He was speaking during an informal briefing on River Walk while the draft report was still being circulated.

O'Brien has said River Walk could be a worthwhile addition to Riverbank's housing stock, but it will get full vetting, including the added demand on city services. He declined after the LAFCO meeting to discuss the project in detail.

The draft environmental report cited 6,712 home sites in Riverbank's current growth areas. They include land already annexed to the city as well as its "sphere of influence," which could be built on at some point.

Lytle-Pinhey noted the home site inventory in her letter. She also said the annexation could violate a policy of maintaining buffers around communities so they have distinct identities. The city limit would be just across McHenry from the Del Rio Country Club, which has numerous homes.

"LAFCO's policies encourage compact and efficient growth, with a preference for infill development on those areas already within the city limits followed by areas within the sphere of influence," Lytle-Pinhey wrote.

LAFCOs govern growth around state

Every county in California has a LAFCO. Along with city annexations, they assess whether local agencies can provide various services.

River Walk would boost the Riverbank's homes by about 30%. It is now home to about 25,000 people. Most of the recent growth has been near the south end, around the Crossroads shopping center.

Riverbank has a modest amount of downtown housing, but a plan approved in 2015 outlined how the core might be revived. Just to the west is a vacant cannery site where a walkable mix of homes and businesses was suggested.

River Walk would provide:

1,550 low-density homes, up to eight per acre, on a total of 467 acres

702 medium-density homes, up to 16 per acre, on a total of 79 acres

180 high-density homes, averaging 18 per acre, on a total of 10 acres

72 acres of mixed use

69 acres of open space near the river

177 acres of parkland and other open space.

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