Toward the end of the meeting, annexation opponents and a couple of commissioners scolded Mr. Engles for a recent letter he wrote to residents that said "remaining an independent area is no longer an option."

"That is quite insulting, quite frankly," said Commissioner Bob Orach, who called the language "misinformation."

Mr. Engles said LAFCO officials previously indicated to him during a private meeting that a sphere of influence would indeed be granted, even though not doing so is an option.

"I stand by the letter," Mr. Engles said. "I stand behind my facts as they were told to me."
In a show of hands, only 15 or so opted for the status quo. And from the back corner of the room, it appeared none preferred the new city of Goleta.

Two groups that opt for Santa Barbara claim wide support. Committee for One and the West Santa Barbara Committee note residents of the area have repeatedly used surveys and the voting booth to convey that they identify with the city's lifestyle.

Goleta, they say, is a fledgling and unproven enterprise faced with challenges -- among them development pressures and the lack of general plan. That big-picture blueprint for growth is a year or more from completion.

Keeping the status quo is acceptable, said committee member and businessman Steve Engles.

But if a sphere must be created, "Our collective voice says, ÔWe want the city of Santa Barbara,' " Mr. Engles said.

The estimated cost to join Santa Barbara per affected household would be about $3,900 in assorted new costs, Mr. Engles testified. "I believe my neighbors would probably be able to afford $3,900 if you asked for it."

Some annexation opponents, and not just mobile home residents, have expressed concern about new costs.

New city taxes are one worry.

Retired UCSB chemistry professor Bruce Rickborn said he did not see any benefits to change.

"Why fix it?" he said. "It doesn't seem to be any more broken than usual. We don't need the city and we don't need the added governance."

Goleta and Santa Barbara officials testified that self determination is important for residents.

"Yes, we are a new city, but we are moving solidly ahead," Goleta Councilwoman Margaret Connell said.

Santa Barbara Mayor Marty Blum said annexation hinges on negotiations with county officials over sharing tax revenue that the county would otherwise lose after annexation.

"If the county doesn't want to talk to us about sharing taxes, then that (annexation) is not going to happen," Ms. Blum said.

LAFCO Commissioner Susan Rose, 2nd District county supervisor, later said the county "will sit down, will work and will try to resolve this issue."
Residents of the eastern Goleta Valley debated the fate of their suburban neighborhoods Thursday at a packed meeting marked by passionate disagreement over the merits and pitfalls of cityhood.

The two-hour afternoon session signaled a fierce battle is brewing across the 93110 and 93111 ZIP codes: Should the area, home to 30,000 people sandwiched between the cities of Goleta and Santa Barbara, remain unincorporated or perhaps join one of its neighbors?

"We think of ourselves as Santa Barbarans," management consultant Bob Rauch told Local Agency Formation Commission members. LAFCO controls local government boundaries countywide and marks potential areas for cities.

It could be a year before the seven-member LAFCO panel decides whether all or part of the so-called no man's land dubbed "Noleta" by some will be drawn, excluding Hope Ranch and Isla Vista, into Santa Barbara's, Goleta's or neither's sphere of influence -- legal jargon for areas a city is expected to annex someday.

Not everyone is as enthused about joining a city.

San Vincente senior citizen mobile home park resident Gene Egan, as a Santa Barbara County resident, has his rent controlled along with rates paid by hundreds of similar tenants.

The city of Santa Barbara has no such provisions.

"We fear we would lose our homes," Mr. Egan told commissioners.

It's a battle likely to last a while.

The decision must wait until LAFCO produces a state-mandated catalog detailing all the urban services that local jurisdictions provide and whom they serve. In a 7-0 vote Thursday, commissioners decided not to expedite review of the Goleta Valley, which will begin in March and finish next fall.

If change does come, most of the 140 people who attended Thursday's meeting at the County Administration Building favored a future with Santa Barbara.