

Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

Rancho land annex sparks environmental debate

Developers clash with Sage Council over building homes in the foothills

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Thursday, December 11, 2003 - RANCHO CUCAMONGA - In the ongoing fight over how far suburbia should spread into the foothills, another round has begun.

In one corner: three developers who want to build upscale homes on nearly 500 acres of land currently north of city limits, annexing the land into the city.

In the other: the Spirit of the Sage Council, an environmental group that opposes the project, and other attempts to pave over the quickly vanishing landscape of the foothills.

The groups began squaring off at Wednesday's planning commission meeting, when Vice-Chairman Larry McNeil took testimony about a plan, backed by city staff, to bring the land and the projects into the city.

"Our hope is that the landowners will bring the projects within our borders, where we can impose higher development standards than are required if they remain under county jurisdiction," City Planner Brad Buller said.

But Craig Sherman, a lawyer hired by the Sage Council, told the planning commission that the group has concerns about the environmental impacts of the project - concerns echoed Thursday by Leona Klippstein, a spokeswoman for the group.

"We believe that building on this land will destroy sensitive habitat that includes coastal sage scrub," she said. "We're also concerned that the land where they want to build is unsafe due to its location in a flood plain, near an earthquake fault, and in the path of wildfires."

Project developers could not be reached Thursday for comment. Building industry advocates have cited private property rights and California's need for more housing when backing similar projects.

Since Sage Council leaders have little chance of stopping the projects entirely, their strategy so far has been to participate in the pre-development process, preparing challenges to environmental impact reports, and pushing for greater mitigation requirements.

Developers that destroy foothill habitat are usually required to offset that destruction by purchasing land elsewhere that will remain as open space - often expanding the North Etiwanda Preserve, established in 1994 to offset habitat lost during the construction of the 210 Freeway.

The current projects call for one acre of open space to be set aside for every acre developed, but the Sage Council wants that ratio to increase four-fold.

The Sage Council also objects to the density of the projects - plans call for up to four houses per acre, while the Sage Council believes that the developers should be limited to 2 units per acre.

Dan Silver, a spokesman for the Endangered Habitats League, said that most environmental groups prefer infill development - building on open patches within already-developed areas - to the expansion of cities into open space.

But when development does occur, he said, densities of at least 10 units per acre are best. "If you're going to build, you want to use land efficiently," he said. "I don't know why they would argue for lower densities. However, if there is environmentally sensitive habitat on this land, though we prefer development that's contiguous to cities, it may not be an appropriate place to build."

But Buller believes that the projects fall within the scope of the city's long-term plan for development.

"We've established a line where we don't want any building above it," he said. "But this project falls below that line, and actually brings development to a point that's even with adjacent properties across the top of the city."

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