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Hillside initiative: Gridlock vs. growth in Santee

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SANTEE SANTEE -- Proposition X supporters say the initiative restricting hillside development will prevent traffic gridlock, while opponents counter it will stifle growth.

On Feb. 15, a special election will be held to vote on Prop. X, which would prevent development on steep slopes.

It calls for a minimum of 1-acre estate lots in planned developments at Fanita Ranch and Rattlesnake Mountain. At the ranch, development would be prohibited within 150 feet of streams, brooks and vernal pools.

The environmental group Preserve Wild Santee collected the signatures required to place the proposition on the ballot. It was also responsible for a similar measure in 1999 that blocked a 2,988-home development on Fanita Ranch.

The group said Prop. X will keep thousands of vehicles off Santee's roads by restricting development around the city. It would also preserve open space and keep the city's views clear from obstruction. The group argues the measure will help keep the Marine Corps Air Station Miramar open by keeping development away from the base.

An analysis of the measure commissioned by the city found Prop. X would restrict development on Rattlesnake Mountain from 373 homes to 96. Only 200 of Fanita Ranch's 2,600 acres could be developed.

For its campaign, Preserve Wild Santee reported collecting \$22,270, with

\$5,000 from individual donors in and out of the community.

The balance came from the Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson-based nonprofit that champions environmental causes. The group supports Prop. X because it would preserve Fanita Ranch as open space, a location it places on the top 10 list of environmentally sensitive lands in San Diego County.

"(Prop. X) was a combination of a good idea, well conceived and well organized," said Kieran Suckling, the group's co-founder. "We felt this was a good conservation investment."

The main opposition to Prop. X is the Save the Santee General Plan committee. Group members argue passage of the measure would deprive the city of \$9 million in fees. It would also lead to more schools closing and less customers for the city's business.

The committee has collected \$236,666 in donations from two entities: \$170,000 from Barratt American, owner of Fanita Ranch, and \$66,666 from Greystone Homes, developer of Rattlesnake Mountain.

The developers have said Prop. X would kill the housing projects.

"If we don't have managed growth, we won't have the money to pay for essential services," said Councilman John Minto.

Ultimately, voters will have the final say.

Until recently, many paid no attention to the issue. Now, it's hard to ignore.

On a recent Saturday morning, Julie Ferguson found Mayor Randy Voepel at

her front door. He quizzed her on the "Yes on Prop. X" sign in the front yard. Ferguson didn't realize it was there.

After talking with the mayor, she replaced it with a "No on Prop. X" and will vote against the measure.

"He came across as very credible. He said it would hurt Santee," said Ferguson, a 15-year resident. "(Preserve Wild Santee) seems a little extreme."

Beverly Pendarvis grew up in the shadow of Rattlesnake Mountain. She does not want to see a developer blast it to put up more homes. She's volunteering for the Yes on Prop. X campaign.

"We played on the hill all the time," she said. "They are taking away the view we moved out here for."

Prop. X pros, cons

A Feb. 15 special election will give Santee residents the opportunity to amend the city's general plan to restrict development on Fanita Ranch, Rattlesnake Mountain and other hillsides. Proponents, who have raised \$22,270, argue it will ease traffic congestion and preserve Santee's small town lifestyle. Opponents, who have raised \$236,666, say the measure will stifle growth by blocking development, costing the city millions in taxes.