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Mormon Church Project Delayed

Judge calls for review of environmental impact

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Wednesday, June 01, 2005 - Plans for a Mormon chapel near Running Springs hit a major snag Wednesday when a judge ruled that the project requires extensive environmental analysis and revoked a county permit to proceed with construction.

The Save Our Forest Association and several other environmental protection groups filed suit against the county in October after planning commissioners refused to require an environmental impact report for the 7.7-acre project along Highway 18.

Instead, the commission decided the project was exempt from the comprehensive study and issued a permit to proceed with construction.

Mormon church officials decided to wait until the lawsuit was resolved.

The environmental groups claim the church project will spur urban growth in the mountains and threaten endangered species, including the Southern Rubber Boa

snake and the San Bernardino flying squirrel.

A San Bernardino Superior Court judge agreed with the groups and ruled the project needs more environmental review to determine the impacts.

"Everything up there is surrounded by a significant amount of national forest,' said Peter Jorris, a board member of the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society, which is a party in the lawsuit. "The county has erred too much on treating the mountains as if they are another suburb.'

Church officials said they conducted several studies required by the county and the California Department of Fish and Game, and reined in the planned size of the chapel to quell environmental concerns.

Mike Scullin, a spokesman for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints congregation in Running Springs, said the church plans will proceed even if it means conducting yet another study.

He was unsure if the church will appeal the San Bernardino Superior Court ruling.

Scullin said the chapel project was mixed in with other mountain developments, such as the plans for a 22-acre church and recreation center near Rim Forest called Church of the Woods.

"Evidently the environmental folks want to lump everything in the large environmental process,' he said. "There are houses up there that are bigger than the chapel we were going to build.'