Director Stresses Effort's Gains

Tom Mullen has come full circle.

Caitlin M. Kelly/
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Tom Mullen is the executive director of the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority.

As a Riverside County supervisor in the 1990s, Mullen pushed hard to find a way to balance the needs of development with rare and endangered species.

Without such a plan, he said, road projects desperately needed for a surging population would bog down for decades in environmental regulations and costly court battles.

Now, Mullen runs the agency charged with overseeing the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, the result of his lobbying effort.

The agency's primary task is to assemble a network of wildlife reserves and passages that cover 240 square miles in western Riverside County.

The county and its 14 western cities established a joint powers authority called the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority to oversee the sweeping plan.

The agency hired staff and began collecting millions of dollars in fees, mostly from developers. At first, the conservation authority had few policies in place on how to oversee the habitat plan. It went through two directors in 16 months before tapping Mullen, 66, in September 2005. His annual salary is $186,996.

Running the agency already has brought challenges.

A routine audit by the county Administrative Office in April found it was spending too much on administration and using restricted funds for expenses outside of land acquisition.

More recently, an environmental group has criticized the agency's decision to spend $160,000 a year on a public-relations firm.

Mullen called the audit's findings important and reasonable. He said the agency has adopted nearly all of the auditors' recommendations. A subsequent audit, released last month, found few problems and had no recommendations.

The conservation authority has come a long way, Mullen said.

"The (second) audit is a reflection of hard work over this past year by an exceptionally competent staff," he said.

The agency needs to secure 153,000 acres of land by 2028, and so far has acquired more than 33,000. Staff members have reviewed more than 300 development projects to determine if they meet the habitat plan's goals.

The agency will bring in more than $60 million in fiscal year 2007, which ends June 30, and spend $48.5 million on land purchases.

Public Relations Help

The agency's decision last year to hire Riverside-based O'Reilly Public Relations for $85,000 and to extend the deal last month at nearly twice that cost has come under fire.

The firm is creating a public-outreach program to help "refocus perception of the plan on its long-term benefits to quality of life in western Riverside County, including its necessity to make transportation improvements," county records show.

Mullen, who had used the firm for campaign work when he was a supervisor, said the public must be educated on the plan and how it can help transportation projects begin within a decade, rather than 25 years or longer. Habitat plans cut red tape, he said.

"Anybody who commutes from one end of the city of Riverside to the other, much less into Corona, Moreno Valley, Temecula, Hemet, Murrieta or any place in between, would like not to have to spend an hour and a half on the freeway at rush hour," he said.

Mullen cites four road projects that are moving forward more quickly thanks to the habitat plan: the Clinton Keith Road expansion between Interstate 215 and Highway 79; the Washington Street extension to Keller Road in the French Valley; Baxter Road extension from Killarney to Porras roads in the French Valley; and Newport Road from Menifee to Highway 79.

Jonathan Evans, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group, said in a letter to Mullen that hiring a public-relations firm fails to benefit the conservation goals of the habitat plan.

In an interview after he met with Mullen on the issue, Evans said he now understands the need to educate the community about what's going on.

Emphasis on Roads

Still, he said, he is concerned about the emphasis on transportation.

"They are constantly trying to shift the emphasis from the conservation aspects of the plan," Evans said. "You are making it sound more like a Caltrans project than a habitat-conservation project."

Mullen said it is vital to raise awareness about what his agency is doing.

"It is not just for those here today but those coming tomorrow," he said. "It is important to know why, in fact, we are spending tens of millions of dollars."

The public-relations contract was not competitively bid, records show.

Patrick O'Reilly, the public-relations firm's founder, said his company will work to create television ads and brochures about the habitat plan.

Doing so, he said, will help leverage grant money for land acquisitions.

"Residents of Riverside County, they have strong support for conservation, and they have strong views on congestion," he said. "It doesn't have to be one or the other."

The authority also has budgeted this year $57,430 for airfare and other travel expenses and $38,600 for food and lodging. Mullen said the staff must travel to Sacramento and Washington, D.C., to lobby for grant money

And nearly $1 million has been paid to the Rand Corp. to conduct a study. The company will try to see how the 25-year window to buy land can be narrowed, similar to what Mullen hopes the plan accomplishes for road building, he said.

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Conservation revenue

Main funding sources for the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority for fiscal 2007 budget:

$29.3 million from fees charged to developers.

$30 million from Measure A, a sales tax to pay for transportation projects.

$2 million from Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fees charged to developers.

$2.4 million from fees charged when trash is dumped into county landfills.