

Habitat Hopes

County can save wildlife plan, if it quits bending to developers

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Protecting open space that provides clean water, healthy air and diverse wildlife habitats found no place else on earth is not only our duty but also enhances the quality of life for Riverside County's human residents.

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Citrus trees wither next to homes in Temescal Valley's Horsethief Canyon. The land, which is proposed for development, is included in the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. Many people fear that the much-touted plan to save wildlife in western Riverside County is on track to fail.

The Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan is a framework to achieve these goals. It is crafted to protect the internationally recognized "biodiversity hot spot" that is western Riverside County.

This comprehensive plan aims to protect more than 140 rare species through habitat conservation. Ambitious? Yes. Essential? Yes.

Unfortunately, two years have passed and the county has yet to implement the plan effectively

Instead, developers have been allowed to build in critical wildlife areas such as Horsethief Canyon. In Temescal Canyon, the county approved a large housing development in the heart of an area that requires 70 percent to 80 percent conservation. Now only a fraction of the land around the edges will be conserved.

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Grasses edge a stream along Temescal Canyon Road, within the county's habitat plan.

Extinction Looms

Land acquisition lags far behind goals, too, and many of the county's unique plants and wildlife continue their slide toward extinction. But is the plan a failure? Not yet. The county has an opportunity to do better.

The plan can achieve many of its goals by proper implementation. Conservation has been continuously outpaced by development since the plan started. When that happens, development must be slowed until conservation goals are met.

Accounting reports have been repeatedly delayed and, when released, conservation losses have been masked. Conservation opportunities have been lost forever. A publicly transparent process is the only way the plan's goals can be achieved. The county needs to stop making back-room deals and start being honest and open with how the plan is being implemented.

And then there's the money. Unreasonably low fees from developers limit conservation of essential habitat because land becomes more expensive by the year. Updating the fee schedule would ensure that adequate funding is available. Without this, the plan is doomed.

It is certainly possible for science to trump politics. On Dec. 4, city and county leaders voted to protect core habitat for the Quino checkerspot butterfly and California gnatcatcher. The decision was based on the best available science -- not politics. That is how the plan is meant to work.

The much-touted plan to save the wildlife of western Riverside County is on track to fail. Despite all of the broken promises to date, county officials need to conscientiously promote the plan's conservation goals, and to stop making concessions to developers that contravene those goals. County leaders still have an opportunity to retain the county's

world-class plant and wildlife diversity. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to make this happen through smarter, tougher and transparent implementation of the habitat conservation plan.

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