



Suit filed over annexation plan

ENVIRONMENT: They say a report on a housing project undermines a conservation plan.

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DESERT HOT SPRINGS - Environmental groups filed a lawsuit Wednesday challenging the city's decision to try to annex almost 2,000 unincorporated acres for a proposed upscale retail and residential development.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club charge that the Palmwood project's environmental-impact report did not take into account that an annexation could undermine the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, said Jonathan Evans, staff attorney for The Center for Biological Diversity.

The plan, which seeks to balance conservation with future development, is in the works and would include preserving much of the project's land as an important wildlife corridor, he said.

"The city is running roughshod over all this substantial planning and thumbing their noses at all the research that has been done by Fish and Wildlife, Fish and Game and independent scientists," Evans said.

Developer Michael Crosby, of Landmark Properties, has proposed the Palmwood project, which would include about 2,000 upscale homes, a golf resort designed largely by pro Phil Mickelson and about 1.4 million square feet of shopping.

The City Council voted on Dec. 22 to approve an environmental-impact report for Palmwood and to apply to Riverside County to annex its 1,926 acres north of the city at Indian Avenue and Highway 62.

Councilman Hank Hohenstein said by telephone that city officials have not seen the lawsuit.

"We have not seen it. Our city attorney has not seen it. This was expected," he said. "We will take a look at it, and we will deal with it. I am sure we will prevail because their science is very weak."

Desert Hot Springs rejected the last version of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, a move that forced planners to remake the roughly \$1.8 billion conservation road map.

Council members have said that they hope to have the county approve the annexation before the new version of the conservation plan has been circulated.