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## Environmental groups sue to block development in Desert Hot Springs

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Two environmental groups filed legal action Thursday against the government agency that approved Desert Hot Springs' annexation of land where a developer wants to build a golf resort.

The Center for Biological Diversity and The Sierra Club are asking Riverside County Superior Court to reject the 2,114-acre annexation approved by the county's Local Agency Formation Commission, or LAFCO, on April 26.

"We need a court to take a look at it and look at it without a politically influenced eye and make a decision," said Jonathan Evans, an attorney for the center.

Evans said the annexation "really throws the regional planning and the habitat planning in the Coachella Valley into a tailspin."

Developer Michael Crosby has the city's blessing to move forward with the Palmwood project on the annexed land surrounding the intersection of Highway 62 and Indian Avenue. He

has said Palmwood would include an estimated 1,850 homes, a retail complex, a 400-room hotel and a golf course, and provide needed tax revenue for Desert Hot Springs, which is working to improve its finances.

But before the annexation, when the land belonged to the county, a proposed regional conservation and development plan, the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, had earmarked most of it for conservation.

After Desert Hot Springs asked to be excluded last year, the conservation plan was revised, recirculated and was in the public comment process when the city's annexation of the land was approved.

Brian Harnik, an attorney for Palmwood, said he had not seen the new lawsuit but said it seems to hinge on the same concerns as one filed in January.

That suit alleges serious flaws in Palmwood's environmental impact report.

"They are just covering all bases possible to attack the project," Harnik said, adding: "We are confident

at the end of the day that all the hard work, environmental studies and environmental documentation comply fully with the laws of the state of California."

The environmental groups also name Crosby, his company, Landmark Properties US Inc., and the city of Desert Hot Springs in the new lawsuit.

At the request of Riverside County supervisors, LAFCO will reconsider its annexation decision, probably in July, LAFCO Chairwoman Robin Lowe said.

Lowe, who voted for the annexation, declined to comment late Thursday on the new lawsuit, saying she had not seen it.