

Paradise Valley, a town of 35,000-plus proposed in desert near Coachella, has fans, foes

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By STEVE MOORE
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It's a whole new town for 35,000 to 40,000 people along Interstate 10 in the middle of Riverside County.

Paradise Valley is a huge master-planned community -- even for a booming region such as the Inland area.

Environmentalists watch closely as Riverside County prepares for a vote on the proposed project -- possibly next year.

Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise

Paradise Valley -- a new town of 12,500 homes -- is planned for the Shavers Valley area east of Indio and along Interstate 10. "We don't see it as a suburb of the Coachella Valley," says Harvey R. Niskala, senior vice president for GLC Enterprises, LLC. "And that's why we don't look at it as sprawl."

The Shavers Valley area is east of Indio near the southern boundary of Joshua Tree National Park.

Developers plan 12,500 homes over the next 20 to 25 years and 3 million square feet of commercial space.

The site covers 5,400 acres--about 8 ½ square miles. Company officials say about 40 percent would remain untouched as open space.

"We don't see it as a suburb of the Coachella Valley," said Harvey R. Niskala, senior vice president for GLC Enterprises LLC. "And that's why we don't look at it as sprawl."

"It's a destination, a new town that will take time to grow."

"With what's happening today in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, we don't see it as that far off."

Doubts

Critics say the sheer scope of Paradise Valley would drain water supplies, pave over habitat for such important species as the desert tortoise and peninsular desert bighorn sheep, and urbanize a scenic area at the very doorstep of a national park.

"Shavers Valley shouldn't be sacrificed for this reckless land speculation," said Jonathan Evans, a staff lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's more like 'Paradise Lost' -- building a new city in a largely pristine wilderness."

"There's nothing out there ... building a city far beyond the fringes of the Coachella Valley is a desert 'mirage' that shouldn't have been considered."

Donna Charpied is a policy advocate for the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, which has offices

in Indio, Riverside and San Bernardino.

"There just isn't enough water," she said. "And with global warming, paving over more of the desert just makes no sense.

"I still say it's 'sprawl on steroids.'

"Paradise Valley flies in the face of logic with today's economy and what's happening in the housing market."

But others say it won't always be so.

Fred Bell, executive director for Desert Chapter of the Building Industry Association, closely tracks development and the Coachella Valley's real estate market.

He sees a "bottoming out" of foreclosure and subprime lending problems by year's end, the market stabilizing in 2009 and renewed growth in 2010.

"With a project the size of Paradise Valley, people will just have to be patient," Bell said.

Tread Lightly

Glorious Land Co. acquired the acreage during the 1990s and now owns it outright, Niskala said.

GLC Enterprises says the Riverside County general plan -- a guide to future development -- envisions the Shavers Valley area along I-10, from the easterly edge of the Coachella Valley to Chiriaco Summit, as a spot for self-contained new towns.

Niskala also outlined how GLC Enterprises is working on water, habitat and becoming a good neighbor to the national park.

A water-transfer agreement with the Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water District in the Bakersfield area will provide a permanent supply, Niskala said. The Colorado River Aqueduct runs through the property. Conservation measures include using reclaimed water on golf courses and landscaping with large amounts of native desert plantings.

Paradise Valley would comply with the Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan for the Coachella Valley and would purchase additional land, Niskala said.

GLC Enterprises plans to set aside a buffer zone for the national park on about 40 acres in the northwestern portion of the project, an area once planned for homes, Niskala said. The master-planned community and the national park are about one-quarter- to one-half-mile apart at various points, Niskala said.

The project would abide by Riverside County's "dark sky" ordinance aimed at enhancing stargazing, Niskala said.

Joe Zarki, chief naturalist/public information officer for the park, said, "We're increasingly seeing 'urban Southern California' coming to the park, and that will change the character over time."

The Paradise Valley property is about seven miles east of Coachella, Niskala said.

Initial access to the project would come from I-10, using an existing frontage road exit.

Pressure and Controversy

The Paradise Valley site lies in Riverside County's 4th District, which is represented by Supervisor Roy Wilson.

"With the environmental challenges, this isn't an easy project to accomplish," he said. "I'm concerned about the impact of something this large.

"But I see it as part of the development pressure facing Riverside County and the Inland Empire. Everyone is looking for some place to put those people," he said.

Wilson said he will remain neutral until after public testimony.

But he sees controversy ahead.

"I call it the 'son of Eagle Mountain,' " he said, referring a bitter battle -- still tied up in the courts -- over turning an old iron-ore mine near Joshua Tree National Park into one of the nation's largest landfills.

Some in nearby desert hamlets like Chiriaco Summit and Lake Tamarisk Country Club can't wait for the services and growth a Paradise Valley community would bring.

Margit Chiriaco Rusche carries on a family tradition of running a freeway travel center.

"We don't see the project as a threat," she said. "We're looking forward to having them as neighbors."

Dan Rettagliata lives in Lake Tamarisk Country Club, north of Desert Center.

Grocery shopping means making a day of it -- driving 100 miles round trip to Palm Desert.

He attended a recent community meeting on Paradise Valley.

"I'm all for it," Rettagliata said.

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