

Groups plea to preserve ranch land

By J. Harry Jones
STAFF WRITER

An impressive array of 26 environmental organizations have sent a letter to local politicians beseeching them to preserve Rancho Guejito, a 21,000-acre undeveloped parcel northeast of Escondido. But the attorney who represents the owners of the ranch, the last intact Mexican land grant remaining in the state, said the appeal won't succeed.

"Guejito is prepared to give a very substantial portion of the property to public access, but we're not prepared to give up everything or sell it at a devalued price to elitist environmental groups," Hank Rupp, lawyer for the Rodney Co., said yesterday.

Late last year, the Rodney Co. said it wanted to develop the property. The company is composed of two people: Theodate Coates, the daughter of Philadelphia millionaire Benjamin Coates, who died in 2004; and James Nicholson, the vice president. Both live in New York City.

Benjamin Coates bought Rancho Guejito in 1974 for \$10 million after the state failed to acquire it for a park. It is considered by many to be a pristine tract representative of California's early history.

On behalf of the company, Rupp asked Escondido officials in December to consider annexing the ranch. He said he envisioned a medical university and housing, as well other unspecified development.

Identical letters from environmental groups were sent earlier this week to more than 50 elected officials, including Escondido Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler, Board of Supervisors Chairman Ron Roberts and Michael Ott, executive director of the Local Agency Formation Commission.

The commission, a state-chartered agency, would have the final say on whether Escondido could annex the ranch. Landowners often seek annexation to cities because they can provide access to water and sewage systems and other services.

The letter encourages leaders to work together and to use funds from local, state and federal sources to purchase the property and preserve it as a park or wilderness area.

"Large-scale development on Rancho Guejito, as recently proposed, would do irreparable harm to San Diego's historic, cultural, and environmental identity," the letter says. "Such 'leapfrog' development would also burden the taxpayer with costly infrastructure extension and service provisions. We ask for your help in averting this outcome."

Rupp dismissed the letter as being typical of methods used by environmental groups.

"They target a property, and then they pressure local politicians, state and federal, to impose further land-use restrictions to devalue the property, then try to buy it themselves," Rupp said. "I view it basically as a hostile takeover."

The letter makes several points concerning the value of the land, including that it provides "an unparalleled opportunity for education and interpretation"; that it is an irreplaceable habitat for wildlife; and that it could provide "unique recreational opportunities for urban populations" if made into a park.

The letter is signed by a host of local, state and national representatives of environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Endangered Habitats League.

"This is really an outreach to elected officials to say we need you as a partner to create this legacy," said Dan Silver, executive director of the league.

County Supervisor Bill Horn said he is quietly trying to gather support and funding to purchase the property for park land. Horn has said he feels betrayed by the Coates family after being told last year it had no plans to ever develop the ranch.

"But no matter how much we want to preserve it, we still need a willing seller," Horn said. "And I don't think we have a willing seller."

That's right, Rupp said. "The property is not for sale."

A development plan is still in the preliminary stages, he said, with expensive biological surveys being conducted.

“There are biologists on the property right now doing a vegetation mapping project,” Rupp said. “We're spending a lot of time, energy and money as custodians, as we have for decades.

“We take our role as custodians of Rancho Guejito very seriously, but we're being treated as if we want to put in a nuclear waste dump,” Rupp said.

Escondido officials have expressed interest in exploring annexation, which would nearly double the geographical size of the city if accomplished. There have been no formal discussions among city officials, Pfeiler said, but the City Council will address the issue when it discusses updating its General Plan next month.

The mayor said she recently sat down with Horn and Supervisor Pam Slater and told them the city acknowledges the property is in the county's jurisdiction, “but it is closest to the city, and if anything is going to happen, it should include Escondido.”

Rupp said he would not make a firm proposal to the city for some time, after all studies have been completed and a development plan has taken shape.

“We want to make sure we are a real benefit to the city of Escondido,” he said. “I can't tell you how kind, gracious and warm they've been to us. They see us as an opportunity and not as a danger. That's who we are.”

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