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Residents seek to save land

MURRIETA: Environmentalist launches a petition against a development near the Santa Rosa reserve.

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By JESSICA ZISKO / The Press-Enterprise

A Murrieta environmentalist is fighting to preserve county land that is slated for homes near the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve.

Diana Hofman, who lives at the southern edge of the 100-acre parcel between Kalmia and Juniper streets, says it's critical for the rehabilitated animals she releases through her home-based, nonprofit rescue center.

"I might as well stop because they'll have no place to go," said Hofman, 57, who launched a neighborhood petition against development and is appealing to local officials for help.

Supporters say homes there are a small price to pay for conservation elsewhere. The landowner, Metropolitan Water District, will give profits from the land sale to the Nature Conservancy, an international organization that manages the 8,300-acre Plateau.

The nonprofit organization plans to use it to conserve land in the Tenaja Corridor, a 3.5-mile gap between the Cleveland National Forest and the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve. The area is also zoned for homes.

Connecting the bridge for wildlife is a "mammoth and critical undertaking," agency spokeswoman Misty Herrin said. The corridor is considered vital to the survival of larger animals that need both areas to avoid inbreeding.

"While we would love to preserve every undeveloped inch of California, it's not possible," Herrin said. "We try to make very scientifically sound judgment calls with limited resources and we often have to make difficult choices."

The Metropolitan Water District will give profits of more than \$1 million through an agreement with the agency. In 1996, the district endowed that money to purchase the parcel as part of mitigation measures since it destroyed habitat when it built the Diamond Valley Lake near Hemet. The agency used the \$1 million to conserve land in the Plateau.

At least one developer is interested in buying the land and building homes, senior county planner John Guerin said. The current zoning allows one house per two acres on most of the property and one house per 20 acres on a portion of the south side.

Riverside County set aside the parcel for open space and conservation in its 2003 general plan, but county supervisors in May reversed it to residential, its original use. The parcel and several hundred others countywide were zoned incorrectly in the plan, officials said.

The Center for Biological Diversity is suing over the changes, which affect about 10,000 acres, many of which were designated in the plan for open space. The lawsuit, filed in May, accuses officials of cutting corners when it publicized the parcels. Nearby residents did not receive notice since state law lets governments advertise changes in newspapers if more than 100 property owners are impacted.

Hofman first learned of the change in June when land surveyors showed up on her property. Since then, she has collected about 50 signatures and set up meetings with officials.

"I hate to think about moving," said Bill Wade, Hofman's neighbor who signed the petition.

Hofman treats hundreds of animals a year through her state- and federal-licensed program, the Wind Canyon Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.

She said she depends on donations to help with the cost of medicine and food. Hofman works part time at the Mountainview Small Animal Hospital in Lake Elsinore.

The parcel behind her Murrieta home is one of the last local spots where she can legally release rehabilitated animals, she said. They cannot be taken to the Plateau or Cleveland National Forest because they could disrupt the biological balance.

Hofman said she understands the need to protect land in the Tenaja Corridor. However, a sensitive ecosystem will be destroyed if this parcel is developed, she said. Most of the injured or sick animals - including hawks, eagles, owls, foxes and bobcats - live within the parcel.

"Once this area is gone, it's gone," Hofman said.