

Wildlife debate unresolved

A revised plan could go into effect in 2007

10:00 PM PST on Saturday, December 30, 2006

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The Press-Enterprise

A carefully-crafted conservation plan that developers, environmentalists and government officials worked on for more a decade is expected to go into effect in 2007.

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However, the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan will not end the tension over proposed development in areas that are seen as environmentally sensitive.

Riverside County and eight valley cities approved the plan earlier this year. The single no vote by Desert Hot Springs killed the measure.

Officials have spent months revising the plan, which is expected to go before public agencies -- including state and federal environmental offices -- for approval by early summer, said John Wohlmuth, executive director of the Coachella Valley Association of Governments. Changing the plan to take Desert Hot Springs out and address other governments' concerns cost about \$1 million, which included staff and consulting time, along with printing costs for the 38-page document, he said.

A draft version of the revised 75-year plan will be circulated next month, he said.

Fred Bell, executive director of the desert chapter of the Building Industry Association, which backs the proposal, predicted a smooth path toward approval.

"Everyone's looked at the plan now," he said. "We won't have any surprises."

The plan would protect 27 desert animals and plants by setting aside 750,000 acres for conservation. Many builders support it because it would streamline development by all by exempting approved areas from expensive legal challenges over environmental issues. In exchange, developers will have to pay fees that would go to help acquire land for conservation.

Bell said it is still unclear whether developers would shy away from Desert Hot Springs because it is not in the plan.

Desert Hot Springs City Manager Ann Marie Gallant said the city could never accept the plan because it would have had a disproportionate impact on development in the city, compared to other desert cities.

City Councilman Hank Hohenstein said development that would have been prohibited "is necessary for the economic survival of our city."

If Desert Hot Springs had signed on to the plan, it would have stopped development of at least 3,000 homes and 1.5 million square feet in commercial space, he said.

Hohenstein said developers would still build in Desert Hot Springs despite the additional red tape that would come with being outside the habitat plan, because land prices are relatively low, views are good and driving time to Los Angeles is shorter.

Jeff Morgan, vice chairman of the Sierra Club's Tahquitz group, predicted "years and years of litigation with Desert Hot Springs" from environmental organizations.

He pointed to the city's recent approval of the massive Palmwood development being proposed for land that activists say is environmentally sensitive.

The Sierra Club also is fighting the proposed Shadowrock project in Palm Springs. The group and the Center for Biological Diversity are involved in two lawsuits that are aimed at stopping Shadowrock, a development of up to 135 homes, a 270-room lodge and a golf course proposed for Chino Canyon near the road to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway.

One of the suits alleges that the City Council illegally voted to extend a development agreement for the project. The city first gave approval to developer Mark Bragg in 1993 and earlier this year voted to extend it by 10 years.

In November 2007, Palm Springs voters will face a referendum on the extension. The group Save Our Mountains got enough signatures to put the initiative on the ballot.

City Attorney Douglas Holland said the city can process any Shadowrock applications and permits in 2007 despite the referendum and lawsuits.

Environmental groups say Shadowrock would pose a threat to the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep. Morgan said that even though negotiations by the city of Palm Springs put the development outside the habitat-plan conservation area, the lawsuits were filed before the plan has been approved. He predicted the litigation would succeed because the project would harm an endangered species.

"I sincerely believe Shadowrock will never be built," Morgan said.

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