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## Suit challenges Sky Ranch project

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**SANTEE** – The city violated state law and its own general plan in approving a 371-unit development last month, according to a lawsuit filed yesterday by two environmental groups.

The project, known as Sky Ranch, is to be built on Rattlesnake Mountain, a largely undeveloped landmark visible throughout the city. Construction is scheduled to begin by early 2006.

In a Superior Court suit filed in San Diego, the groups seek to set aside the City Council's unanimous approval June 8 of Sky Ranch and suspend all activity on the project.

The Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson and Preserve Wild Santee claim the city violates its general plan by not doing enough to minimize potential damage to wildlife and Santee hillsides.

The development would also allow a density inconsistent with the plan, the plaintiffs allege.

The city also violated state law in preparing an inadequate environmental impact report this spring, said John Buse, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The city of Santee and the city council are listed as defendants. The developer,

Greystone Homes, was named as a 'real party,' meaning it has a stake in the case and could be heard in court.

Mayor Randy Voepel disagreed with the allegations and described the suit as "typical environmentalist obstructionism." It's part of their strategy to delay the project, he said.

"This is obviously fabricated," the mayor said. "And we will win. The only issue is how long will it take, how much money it will cost."

City officials have estimated that the homes at Sky Ranch could sell for \$1 million each, providing Santee with much needed "move-up housing," supporters say.

They also say the project could help boost the city's economy and property tax revenue and add luster to the city's image.

This year, Preserve Wild Santee spearheaded Proposition X, an initiative that would have greatly limited the number of homes allowed on Rattlesnake Mountain. The Center for Biological Diversity donated thousands of dollars in support of Proposition X, which voters soundly defeated.

Even though the environmental impact report was certified by the City Council, the report alluded to some of the problems cited in the lawsuit.

The report found that Sky Ranch could add about 3,810 car trips per day to the 450,000 estimated daily trips on city streets. It could also significantly affect air quality during construction and produce excessive noise from trucks and heavy equipment.

The report also concluded that the project could significantly threaten native habitat and disturb wildlife, such as the threatened California gnatcatcher.

David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity said it might not be realistic to block the project entirely. "We would like to see the project scaled back to protect the environment," he said.

City Attorney Shawn Hagerty said he could not comment on the suit because he had not yet received a copy of it.