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Suit filed over Riverpark Environmentalists: Project will hurt waterway

By Susan Abrams,
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SANTA CLARITA -- Four environmental groups have filed a lawsuit against the city for its approval of the 1,100-home Riverpark project to be built along the Santa Clara River.

The complaint states that the city and the project developer, The Newhall Land and Farming Company, ignored concerns by environmentalists, including the project's encroachment on the river's floodplains and the air and water pollution they say it will create.

"The Santa Clara River is a critically important waterway for rare wildlife in Southern California and is one of the most endangered rivers in the United States," Peter Galvin, conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement issued Monday. "We have filed this lawsuit because our public oversight agencies have once again miserably failed to provide protection for the river's web of life. Conservation is not just good common sense. It's the law."

The lawsuit was filed Friday in Ventura County Superior Court by the Sierra Club, Friends of the Santa Clara River, the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Water Impact Network.

The Saugus project last month received unanimous City Council approval.

The council's approval came on the heels

of a national report released in April, which stated that the Santa Clara River is the 10th-most-endangered in the United States.

The proposal approved by the council calls for building 1,089 homes on the 695 acres, which under city regulations could contain up to 3,000 homes. Newhall Land says it is constructing parks and trails and has offered some 318 acres of open space from company-owned parcels around the city, in addition to 389 acres of riverfront land within the development.

The land offered to the city includes the so-called "Round Mountain" property -- 37 acres east of Interstate 5 and north of Magic Mountain Parkway.

Newhall Land is also offering more than \$22 million in right-of-way dedications and bridge fees for the city's 8.5-mile east-west Cross Valley Connector.

"Unfortunately, this is not a surprise," Newhall Land spokeswoman Marlee Laufer said about the lawsuit. "It is a big disappointment that they would litigate against Riverpark. There have been numerous public hearings. The project protects the river and will bring in far less homes than is actually allowed."

Critics said the mitigations are inadequate.

"I just want (the city of Santa Clarita) to

get the heck out of the floodplain and protect the significant ecological area as they promised to do when they became a city," said Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River. "Eighty percent of the portions of this project adjacent to the river are closer than 100 feet. This is not an adequate buffer."

An attorney representing the city said Monday that he could not comment until the complaint was reviewed.