

This is particularly interesting and welcomed bcs. Bob Stine, Tejon Ranch CEO, sits on the BOD of the Bakersfield Californian. We've had a tough time getting any press, much less objective, out of the Californian consequently...

<http://www.bakersfield.com/1020/story/441489.html>

Henry column: Devil is in the details for Tejon's and plan

By LOIS HENRY, Californian columnist,

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I'd love to be happy about the recently announced conservation of 240,000 acres of land on Tejon Ranch. It's described as a jolly win-win by all those involved. Our esteemed governor praised it as an example of the good that can come when groups work together.

I agree it's better to see groups working together than suing each other. And it is a phenomenal amount of wilderness — 90 percent of the ranch.

But I can't help thinking the environmental groups that signed off on this deal may come to regret it.

The Sierra Club, Audubon California, Endangered Habitats League, Natural Resources Defense Council and Planning and Conservation League all agreed to drop their opposition to Tejon's massive 23,000-house Centennial project, its Tejon Mountain Village project set in critical California condor habitat and its I-5 Tejon Industrial Complex expansion projects in exchange for conservation easements on 178,000 acres and the option of buying easements on another 62,000 acres.

Some things about the agreement hit me as cockeyed.

First and foremost, none of the groups has seen the environmental impact reports on these projects. EIRs give exacting details on how projects will be developed, how developers plan to alleviate pollution and habitat destruction, where roads will go and where they're getting their water.

These environmental groups, which all preach reading the fine print, haven't read the EIRs because they aren't done yet. Perhaps by fall, Tejon spokesman Barry Zoeller told me.

Wow. Isn't that like buying the cow before you know if it gives milk?

Bill Corcoran, the Sierra Club's regional director who was key in negotiating the deal, said attorneys on his side of the table worked out issues they had with the developments, and they can go to court to enforce those issues. So they don't expect any nasty surprises.

Local Sierra Club rep Gordon Nipp said negotiations like this have become common locally. There are 29 such agreements in Kern County alone where the club dropped opposition in exchange for better environmental consideration.

"This is a comprehensive agreement that addresses numerous far-ranging issues," Nipp said of the Tejon deal. "This is a great thing for the entire state."

Maybe so. But without the EIRs in hand, that's going a little too much on faith for my comfort.

The other thing that hit me right away was that Tejon had already pledged to preserve 100,000 acres in a widely touted 2003 deal with Trust for Public Land.

That leaves 140,000 acres. And of that, about 78,000 acres wasn't developable. Tejon CEO Bob Stine himself told this paper years ago that more than half of the ranch could never be developed because of the steep canyons and hillsides.

Which brings us down to the 62,000 "optional" acres. This land is broken up into five chunks scattered around the ranch. It is developable.

But the environmental groups have to buy easements on that land. And they have three years to do it.

Much was also made of a 49,000-acre state park. But it would partially be in one of those five chunks of “optional” land. If they can’t get the easement, what happens to the park?

Don’t know. A summary of the agreement on the Web site www.tejonpreserve.com just says all parties must “commit to work” toward establishing a park, not that it’s a sure thing.

No one knows how much those easements will cost. I’m betting they won’t be cheap. I also wonder how the state can create a new park — even years from now — when we’re talking about closing parks due to our never-ending budget woes.

So, essentially, it looks to me like these enviro groups gave up their ability to oppose Tejon’s developments for the mere chance to buy easements on 62,000 acres.

The money to buy those easements isn’t in hand, but several environmental reps said Thursday they wouldn’t have made the deal if they weren’t confident they could do it.

Hmmm. Getting even further out there on the faith bridge.

When I asked Corcoran where the money would come from, he quickly answered, “state bonds.”

I have a slight problem with that, but I’ll let Corcoran make my point by citing what he told us in 2003 when he criticized the deal between Tejon and Trust for Public Land:

“There are a lot of questions that need to be answered before state bond money should be given to Tejon Ranch or the Trust for Public Land,” he said then. “A portion of the ranch is undevelopable because of its topography. It would not be a wise expenditure of scarce bond funds if we’re merely setting aside what cannot be developed anyway.”

He also bemoaned the idea that Tejon would turn around and use that taxpayer money to fund its development plans and enrich its shareholders.

And that’s changed, how?

Here’s what hasn’t: The Centennial project is still sprawl at its worst.

Tejon touts it as self-sustaining, with a jobs-housing ratio that will keep people from having to commute to Los Angeles. History has shown us these “new town” concepts take decades to actually attract the jobs necessary to keep people out of their cars.

In those decades, our air pollution will worsen, traffic will be even more of a nightmare and the already crumbling I-5 will further deteriorate.

Even though the Tejon Mountain Village is much smaller (only about 3,000 houses), traffic and air are still critical issues.

As is habitat for the California condor, which taxpayers have spent tens of millions of dollars to bring back from the brink of extinction, according to Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which was approached by Tejon to be a part of this alliance but declined because its mission is to protect species, and this deal doesn’t do that.

Anderson was quick to say the deal was a “large leap forward” from the old 100,000-acre proposal. But “they’re still building in a significant amount of critical habitat for these birds,” she said.

Air and traffic come up again on the Industrial Complex at the base of the Grapevine, with an eventual buildout of 20 million square feet of warehouse and retail space. Right now it’s about 5 million square feet.

Zoeller and others point out this agreement in no way keeps others from opposing the projects, commenting on the EIRs or even suing.

Yes. But not the big hitters with the money, the resources, the experience and the expertise to actually make a difference.

While I hope all the parties are right and their faith hasn’t been misplaced, I’m just jaded enough to wonder if, as some in

the environmental community have grumbled, this isn't a "deal with the devil."

Meanwhile, as each piece of Tejon's development chess match moves forward, the Sierra Club and others will stay mum and gather another easement on another portion of the ranch.

It'll take 30 years to complete. That's a long time to keep quiet.

Lois Henry's column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. E-mail her at lhenry@bakersfield.com or call her at 395-7373.