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Lawsuit seeks to stop huge development near San Jacinto wildlife preserve

The Friends of the Northern San Jacinto Valley and the Sierra Club filed suit against the county Thursday.

City News Service Staff Writer

A planned housing development abutting a wildlife preserve near San Jacinto should be stopped to protect the local habitat, prevent traffic congestion and maintain air quality, environmentalists suing Riverside County said today.

The Friends of the Northern San Jacinto Valley and the Sierra Club filed suit against the county Thursday — Earth Day — seeking to void the Board of Supervisors' March 23 decision to allow the Villages of Lakeview to move ahead. (SJWA)

The Friends of the Northern San Jacinto Valley and the Sierra Club filed suit against the county Thursday — Earth Day — seeking to void the Board of Supervisors' March 23 decision to allow the Villages of Lakeview to move ahead.

"There are so many things wrong with this, including where it's located," said Sue Nash, with Friends of the San Jacinto Valley. "It violates the general plan. It's premature, with all the problems in local real estate, and nobody really knows when it's going to be built."

County Executive Office spokesman Ray Smith told City News Service that county attorneys had not yet reviewed the lawsuit, but would "address the allegations" after careful analysis.

According to the plaintiffs, the Board of Supervisors "improperly approved" the Villages of Lakeview by ignoring the general plan — which identifies development goals and limitations — for the Lakeview-Nuevo zoning district.

The groups also allege the board failed to comply with provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act, noting that the environmental impact report prepared for the project did not examine the potential advantages of building closer to an urban area.

"They need to go through the proper process they've avoided," said George Hague, with the San Geronio Chapter of the Sierra Club. "If this were to undergo the correct analysis, we believe the county would realize that it's inappropriate."

The Villages of Lakeview calls for the construction of 11,150 residential units, potentially adding more than 30,000 people to 1,000 acres near the Ramon Expressway, on the southern border of the San Jacinto Wildlife Area.

The Upland-based Lewis Group of Companies is proposing to maintain roughly 1,000 acres of open space, as well as construct parks, trails, a community center and library.

"The general plan is very clear about having high-density developments in or near cities," said Nash. "If you

build next to the preserve, it's going to destroy our ability to protect those species."

The 9,000-acre preserve is home to waterfowl, wading birds and quail.

Nash complained that "air quality impacts" of greater traffic volume tied to the new development have not been accounted for. She said the developer's original plans were drawn up in 2006, when the Inland Empire housing market was booming.

"They never updated their findings. They're still saying there's a housing shortage in Riverside County," she said.

According to Irvine-based RealtyTrac, Riverside County led the state in foreclosure activity during the first quarter of this year.

Lewis Group has indicated no construction will take place until median home prices recover to 2007 levels in the county.

The development is also being challenged by the city of Riverside, which filed its own lawsuit, citing concerns about the added pressure on area roads as Villages of Lakeview residents commute in and out of the city.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society filed a separate suit, saying the development poses a risk to the local ecology and the climate.