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## Three lawsuits target Riverside County for approving large housing project

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The city of Riverside and four environmental groups sued Riverside County on Thursday, challenging its approval last month of one of the region's largest housing developments.

The Villages of Lakeview would put 11,350 homes between Perris and San Jacinto. The project, next to the state's San Jacinto Wildlife Area, could add more than 30,000 new residents to the region and its already clogged roadways.

In three separate lawsuits, the groups contend the Board of Supervisors violated not only the California Environmental Quality Act but the county's own general plan in approving the development last month.

The groups say the county didn't properly analyze the development's effects on traffic, air quality, public health and the endangered and threatened wildlife in the nearby preserve.

The 10,000-acre wildlife area is a home to migratory birds. Hunting is allowed.

"It is a very large, urban project adjacent to the wildlife area," said Tom Paulek with the Friends of Northern San Jacinto Valley, one of the environmental groups that sued Thursday.

"We are hoping if the suit is successful, the county will take a better look at what they approved and examine some alternatives that are less damaging to the wildlife area," Paulek said.

The Upland-based Lewis Group of Companies has proposed the 2,786-acre community, which would include homes, parks, trails, a library, a community center and more than 900 acres of open space.

Riverside County spokesman Ray Smith said Thursday that the county hadn't been served with the lawsuits. Lawyers will review the cases and determine the most appropriate course of action, he said.

Developer Randall Lewis told supervisors recently that the project went through thorough planning. On Thursday, he said he had not seen the lawsuits and could not comment.

Supervisor Marion Ashley, who represents the area, has praised the proposal and the company for working with the community and adding quality amenities to the project. Ashley did not return a message Thursday seeking comment.

### City Files Alone

The city of Riverside filed its own lawsuit Thursday; the Friends of the Northern San Jacinto Valley and the Sierra Club filed a joint complaint. The Center for Biological Diversity and the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society filed a third lawsuit.

The county's general plan guides future growth. According to the lawsuits, the general plan calls for development to be near existing urban and suburban areas.

The Villages of Lakeview is the opposite, said Rachel Hooper, an

attorney for the Sierra Club and Friends of the Northern San Jacinto Valley.

"It's a major new urban area -- really a mega development that is being planned for an area that is wholly agriculture and remote from other urban or suburban areas," she said.

### Traffic a Concern

The city of Riverside appears to be concerned about the traffic coming into and through Riverside as residents commute to work.

The Villages of Lakeview was designed to take advantage of a "major transportation corridor" outlined in the county general plan, the city's lawsuit reads.

"But that transportation corridor was cut in half, now ending at the City of Riverside's doorstep."

### Urgency Questioned

In addition, the lawsuits contend the county, in approving the Lewis project, improperly amended that general plan outside of the normal update that occurs every five years by citing extraordinary circumstances.

"Here, because the Project will not be built in the foreseeable future, there is no urgent need for the Extraordinary Amendment," the Sierra Club lawsuit reads.

Paulek, a retired Department of Fish and Game manager for the San Jacinto Wildlife Area, said the county should have slowed down.

"There is ample time to do good planning," he said