



Warehouses approved for site next to Riverside wilderness park

10:00 PM PST on Tuesday, March 9, 2010

By ALICIA ROBINSON
The Press-Enterprise

An industrial development next to Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Park can go forward after the Riverside City Council approved it Tuesday, but while city officials say it will bring jobs, conservationists worry it will harm endangered animal habitat.

The project includes the nearly 37-acre Alessandro Business Center, a four-building industrial development planned for the north side of Alessandro Boulevard just west of San Geronio Drive.

The industrial center will abut the wilderness park. As part of the project, developer Western Realco will donate about 36 acres at the site to be incorporated into the wilderness park.

"One of the huge benefits of this is that we're transitioning privately owned land to, now, parkland," said Councilman Andy Melendrez, who represents the Alessandro area.

The council approved the project 6-0, with Councilman Steve Adams absent.

The Friends of Riverside's Hills, along with the Center for Biological Diversity, San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society and Sierra Club, have argued the industrial park and a similar development planned for the south side of Alessandro would cut off a pathway for endangered animals to get between preserved habitat at Sycamore Canyon and March Air Reserve Base.

They also maintain that the industrial park site was once part of a special preserve for the Stephens' kangaroo rat, a federally endangered species, but that the land was improperly taken out of that conservation area.

"There's never been environmental review of this process of removing this land" from the kangaroo rat habitat plan, said Len Nunney, secretary for the Friends of Riverside's Hills.

An attorney representing the developer disputed Nunney's claim, saying the land was only part of negotiations for the conservation area and was never actually added.

When agencies including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to the kangaroo rat habitat plan in 1998, "the core reserve was complete. This property was not necessary," attorney Michelle Ouellette said.

An environmental study of plans for the Alessandro Business Center found it could affect the kangaroo rat and the least Bell's vireo, a protected bird in California. The report listed a number of steps the developer would have to take to lessen harm to protected species.

The other nearby industrial project, which is on the south side of Alessandro and outside the city limits, is scheduled for a vote by Riverside County supervisors Tuesday.