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Lawsuit alleges safety issues at Christian camp

By JOE NELSON
Staff Writer

The Center for Biological Diversity and three other environmental groups have filed a lawsuit against the county, alleging it failed to properly address fire safety and environmental issues before approving a 50-acre Christian camp in Twin Peaks.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in San Bernardino Superior Court, also names as a party of interest Royal Rangers, a national Christian youth ministry for boys. It charges that the Board of Supervisors violated the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and county and government codes when it approved the Royal Rangers Adventure Camp on Feb. 23.

"The county has not examined the lawsuit. However, the county stands by the process that led to the project's approval and is confident the process complied fully with CEQA and all other applicable laws," county spokesman David Wert said in a statement Friday.

He said it would be Royal Rangers' job to defend the project.

Reached by telephone Friday, Tim Bruder, district director for Southern California Royal Rangers, declined to comment.

It is the latest development in a 10-year saga that pitted a church ministry's grand vision against scrutinizing county officials and mountain residents.

Royal Rangers, a nonprofit affiliated with the Missouri-based Assemblies of God Church, is building the 415,380-square-foot camp on Highway 189 near Pine Crest Road.

Over the course of a decade, 27 buildings will be constructed on the site including a multipurpose room, an enclosed amphitheater and gun range, a conference center, rope courses, outdoor chapel, dormitories and a 300-person capacity swimming pool, among other amenities.

At the urging of the Board of Supervisors and county planners, Royal Rangers has scaled down the project since first introducing it in 2001. Maximum occupancy has been dwindled from 1,297 to 350, one amphitheater has been eliminated and the other will be enclosed, along with a gun range.

Still, the environmental groups suing the county, which also include Save Our Forest Association, the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society and Christians for the Earth, feel these are merely cosmetic changes and will not limit the number of people flooding the camp.

"This is just as big a project as it was before, the only difference is they're saying they're not going to have that many people there," said Adam Keats, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. "There's nothing to ensure the numbers will stay at 350."

The biggest concern is camper safety and their ability to evacuate should a major wildfire or other disaster occur. Mountain residents and environmentalists have long maintained that the area's roads are too narrow and campers and staff would not be able to evacuate during an emergency.

One fire chief characterized the camp's proposed evacuation plan as "unrealistic" and "questionable at best," according to the lawsuit. "The board ignored the clear and knowledgeable warnings by the community and public safety officials that this project would unnecessarily and irresponsibly put a great number of people at risk, said Hugh Bialecki, president of Save Our Forest Association.

In addition to fire safety issues, the county failed to properly mitigate for the adverse impacts the project will have on the Southern Rubber Boa, a threatened species of snake that inhabits a limited range in the San Bernardino Mountains. The California Department of Fish and Game criticized the environmental impact report for failing to properly address the impacts of the project on the snake, and indicated another report was merited to adequately address the issue, according to the lawsuit. "It's unfortunate the county decided to ignore these things. This is not the way the system should be working," Keats said.