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ENVIRO GROUPS SUE OVER DEVELOPMENT

By Fiona Smith

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Upset over plans to build a community for 34,000 people in rural Riverside County, environmental groups filed two lawsuits Thursday arguing government officials failed to look at the traffic, pollution and wildlife impacts of the project.

The Sierra Club and Friends of Northern San Jacinto Valley filed one suit and the Center for Biological Diversity and San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society filed another arguing Riverside County officials violated their own land-use rules and failed to properly look at the project's environmental impacts as required by the California Environmental Quality Act.

In March, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors approved plans by Nuevo Development Corp. to build a 2,800-acre development called Villages of Lakeview situated next to the protected San Jacinto Wildlife Area. The project would include more than 11,000 housing

units and 500,000 square feet of commercial space.

"This project is essentially a new city... in the middle of rural Riverside County," said Rachel Hooper, a San Francisco attorney with Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger who represents the Sierra Club and Friends of Northern San Jacinto Valley.

The project goes against the county's stated goal of discouraging sprawl development and officials failed to consider building the project closer to urban centers, the environmental groups said. It also inadequately analyzed the project's impacts on local wildlife as well as the huge jump in car traffic that would worsen air quality and increase greenhouse gas emissions, the lawsuits stated, Friends of Northern Jacinto Valley v. Riverside County, 10007572 and Center for Biological Diversity v. Riverside County, 10007574. (Riverside Sup. Ct.)

The county had not been served with the lawsuit yet and it would not comment on the allegations, said

Ray Smith, a county spokesman.

The project would convert land zoned for agricultural use and, in order to approve the change the county, issued an extraordinary amendment to its general plan. The general plan sets zoning regulations and the long-term development vision for the county. The general plan is reviewed for changes every five years, but the extraordinary amendment allows the county to approve urgently needed projects outside of that review process.

The county cited a need for additional housing in Riverside County, as well as the fees it would bring in for infrastructure improvement, as a reason to issue the extraordinary amendment, Hooper said.

There is no housing shortage in the region. Rather there is a foreclosure crisis, Hooper said. Because of the housing downturn, the developer said it will not move forward with the project until prices increase, "so what is the urgent need to approve this project?" she said.