

After 15 years, Riverside County delivers final denial to Paradise Valley, a proposed new 'town' near Joshua Tree

A last-ditch effort to resuscitate plans to build a new city on the southern side of Joshua Tree National Park failed at the Riverside County Board of Supervisors meeting on Tuesday, marking a win for conservationists and eastern Coachella Valley residents who voiced concerns about damaging sprawl.

For at least 15 years, GLC Enterprises LLC has been working through the county's planning process to get approval for Paradise Valley, a development with up to 8,490 homes and about 1.3 million square feet for commercial and civic uses.

But the Riverside County Planning Commission [in late August](#) recommended that the county deny the project [based on multiple environment concerns](#), as well as numerous questions around safety and affordable housing.

Typically, a denial at that stage might cause developers to head back the drawing board. But on Tuesday, the project's backers asked for a 90-day continuance to address the concerns.

After an hour of public comment, during which about two dozen people spoke out against the proposal and just two spoke in favor, the supervisors unanimously voted to accept the Planning Commission's recommendation and deny the project without any continuance.

County Supervisor V. Manuel Perez, who represents the fourth district that includes the Coachella Valley, said he didn't know if the project was ultimately feasible.

"Planning for an entirely new town in an area that has been undisturbed and an important part of our habitat plan that is miles away from the nearest city, from county services, is very difficult to entertain," he said.

He emphasized the safety concerns that come from having just one interchange proposed to enter and exit the development, citing "the new normal" of fires, the potential for earthquakes, or car crashes.

"When we're planning for the future of families who will live in a place like that, we have to do it in a sustainable way, and above all, make sure it's safe," he said.

Perez commended the applicant for their dedication and conviction, and said they're welcome to file a new plan that "they can rally community support behind."

Buy Photo

A development called Paradise Valley is proposed for this remote area just east of the Coachella Valley on both sides of Interstate 10, March 19, 2018. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Frans Bigelow, project manager for Paradise Valley, said in a statement that the developers will now be forced to look at other options for their privately held lands. He estimated that thousands of construction jobs and permanent jobs could have been brought to the area, plus more than \$5 million in projected annual tax revenue.

“We are disappointed in today's decision by the Board of Supervisors who were unwilling to grant us a continuance,” he said. “A continuance would have afforded us the opportunity to work with county staff and the community on the issues raised in the staff report.”

The decision to deny a continuance for the project cheered by about two dozen residents who had convened to oppose the project throughout the planning stage, counting numerous environmental groups and social justice activists among their ranks. During the public hearing, they held up red paper signs that said “DENY Paradise Valley.” They collectively applauded after the vote.

A massive-scale project in the desert

The project was proposed for about 1,900 acres of a 5,000-acre plot of land near the southern end of Joshua Tree National Park that extends north and south of Interstate 10, west of Cotton Springs Road, north of Box Canyon Road, and east of the Cactus City Rest Area.

The development would encompass six “villages” with various uses, such as one meant residents age 55 and older and another with a resort hotel and time share units. Schools, parks and trails would be constructed, as well as retail, commercial and office space. Each village would include commercial developments and services clustered in the village core, meant to limit the need for cars.

But the planning report on the project found it could run afoul of environmental requirements. The project was subject to the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, which aims to guide development while conserving 240,000 acres of open space and protecting wildlife.

Buy Photo

A development called Paradise Valley is proposed for this remote area just east of the Coachella Valley on both sides of Interstate 10, March 19, 2018. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Planners also noted the safety hazards that could come from the single interchange proposed for the project, and raised concerns that just 5 percent of the proposed homes, or 425 units, would be designated for affordable housing.

Gary Gray of the San Geronio Chapter of the Sierra Club said during the public hearing there were multiple good reasons to deny the project.

“The Coachella Valley needs thoughtful development in undeserved communities, not leapfrog sprawl projects that serve only a few,” he said in a statement after the vote. “I’m grateful that Riverside County’s Supervisors did the right thing and stopped this ill-advised project.”

Other environmental groups calling the project’s denial a victory included the National Parks Conservation Association, the California Native Plant Society, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Lack of affordable housing

Multiple residents came forward to oppose the project based on the type of housing it would provide, including many homes priced between \$200,000 and \$400,000. They said the eastern Coachella Valley, like much of California, is in the midst of a housing crisis and residents need affordable places to live.

“Paradise Valley would have diverted county resources away from communities in need to serve an unnecessary project in the remote desert,” said Lesly Figueroa of the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.

Before casting his vote accepting the denial, Supervisor Jeff Hewitt said he didn’t think the developer could solve the issues on the table within 90 days. But he emphasized the need for more housing, and said that if it weren’t for environmental issues, that the developer could address the affordable housing and interchange concerns.

“It really pains me, because we’re thinking about keeping all these different critters and I guarantee you there’s no spot on earth that doesn’t have very sensitive life,” Hewitt said, “That’s the way biology works. Life always finds a way somewhere. But we as a species, we need more places to live.”