

Road map for the future

Innovative Riverside County multispecies plan preserves open spaces, wildlife habitat, while it plans for growth

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Riverside County has been blessed with a remarkable landscape and a wealth of environmental assets, from unique plant and animal species to green-banked rivers and miles of open space for hiking and family outings. On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors will vote to adopt a plan to preserve that natural legacy with an innovative plan for the future of western Riverside County.

Riverside is not a particularly wealthy county, and few would now confuse it with Santa Barbara or Mendocino counties as a hotbed for "green consciousness." But by voting for the Western Riverside Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, Riverside will lead the state — and nation — with a road map for the future that provides essential services and preserves habitat and open space in an era of runaway growth.

The scope of the MSHCP is nothing less than visionary. It preserves forever 153,000 acres as protected habitat and wildlife corridors for over 140 threatened, endangered and sensitive species. Vast swaths of scenic corridors are preserved along Interstate 15, Highway 60 and the San Jacinto River. Thousands of acres are dedicated to movement corridors for wildlife, including a crucial link between the Cleveland and San Bernardino National Forests.

By ensuring that species will be conserved, the plan means that it will be easier and faster to build new roads and highways. By also combining the elements of land use, the plan establishes areas for new houses, schools, offices and shopping areas.

Faced with a projected increase of over 1 million new residents in Riverside by



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2020, the alternative — and the reason for the development of the plan in the first place — was endless litigation and paralysis. Unplanned growth would have led to a general loss of public confidence in government to provide needed services and infrastructure, including protecting habitat and open space.

The MSHCP, by contrast, is county and city planning at its very best. It provides for more orderly development and less time in the car. It protects and provides better places to raise families. Everyone benefits.

For conservationists this large-landscape solution offers the best hope of threatened ecosystems. Developers gain certainty, helping promote predictable business environment. The county retains autonomy over land, while wildlife agencies aren't burdened by the regulatory and legal quagmire of developing project-by-project mitigation.

Riverside set the state record for developing this plan with a process that took less than four years. To be sure, developing the plan was not always easy. There were hundreds of meetings with representatives of dozens of state and federal agencies, including wildlife agencies. City and county transportation planners took part, as did representatives of flood control districts, and throughout, the public was invited to have its say. At pub-

lic meetings, citizens, conservationists and business interests were all able to voice their concerns and objectives.

In time, all participants came to recognize that whatever their differences, they were developing a shared plan and vision for the future of Riverside County.

None of this would have been possible without political leadership by the county supervisors led by former Supervisor Tom Mullen and continuing with the current chair, John Tavaglione. The supervisors recognized the benefits of approaching Riverside's future using this coordinated process and demonstrated a commitment to Riverside's residents that transcends politics.

For its part, the Davis administration warmly applauds these efforts. California has already pumped in excess of \$66 million into conserving land in the area set aside for conservation, and stands ready to provide additional funds from various sources. The plan provides the Department of Parks and Recreation an opportunity to develop an off-highway vehicle park west of Beaumont, and acquire lands for conservation using an anticipated \$27 million in off-highway vehicle funds.

Counties and local governments that are also grappling with development pressure have much to learn from Riverside's experience and its use of a habitat plan along with transportation and land-use considerations. In years and decades to come, Riverside residents will thank the supervisors for adopting their innovative road map.

With its vote, the board of supervisors is making a commitment to a better future for the county with a plan that enhances quality of life and protects the wildlife, open space and landscapes that make Riverside a unique place to live.