

“Pact paves way for future”

Riverside County is promised federal and state support for land-use planning.

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Top federal and state officials pledged Monday to work with Riverside County as it maps the land for wildlife, roads and housing in preparation for an onslaught of growth.

Agencies in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., promised to aid the local planning effort and to point the county in the direction of funding that could help pay for such things as new roads and open space. If successful, Riverside County's plan will carve out room and road space for 1.2 million additional residents expected within 20 years and will also set aside land to harbor imperiled plants and animals.

The county has its act together in a way that's very unusual from where we sit in Washington," said David Hayes, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Dr. Hayes was among three senior agency Officials to sign the so-called Partnership Action Plan on Monday.

The coordination of land uses, plus efforts to put both developers and environmentalists to work on the blueprint for the future, earned Riverside County a mention in Vice President Al Gore's profile on livable communities, Hayes said.

Gore's report profiles 17 communities that have teamed up with state and federal agencies to manage major planning projects.

Federal and state officials have been at the table for 16 months as the county began hammering out its plan. Monday's pact means they plan to stay there. "It finalizes, if you will, what each of these agencies have been doing," said county Supervisor Tom Mullen, the main architect of the county's planning process.

The pact belies the notion that high-level government is an obstacle and not a partner, said James Lyons, undersecretary of the Natural Resources and Environment division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The USDA will help Riverside County look into running a transportation corridor through the Cleveland National Forest, Lyons said.

Riverside County is spending more than \$20 million to map the land for nature preserves and infrastructure.

Though the pact does not automatically translate into funding, having the attention of policy-makers can help.

"What today's agreement does is put us on record that Riverside County is going to be a priority," Hayes said. The county is already well positioned to receive money from Prop. 12 for the purchase of open space, said Mary Nichols, secretary of the California Resources Agency, which oversees land, wildlife and parks.

Hayes said he has seen enough of Riverside County's vision for the future that he is convinced the effort can be pulled off.

"We have seen first-hand that this is real," Hayes said, "that this is serious and that this is terribly important."