

“Federal, state officials vow to back county” ***Billions will be needed to implement plan that will set aside land for species***

Reprinted with the permission of
The Californian

By Wyatt Haupt Jr.
Staff Writer

Tuesday, September 26, 2000

RIVERSIDE - Federal and state officials pledged Monday to support Riverside County's effort to develop a framework for habitat conservation, transportation and land-use decisions well into the 21st century.

But that pledge didn't come with any immediate guarantees that the billions of dollars needed to implement the plan would be available when the county needs the money.

The comments came during a press conference held Monday at the County Administrative Center in downtown Riverside. The event was attended by several federal and state officials, including David Hayes, deputy secretary of the Department of Interior, and Mary Nichols, secretary of the state Resources Agency.

"The notion at the federal level is that communities know best; you know best; your Board of Supervisors knows best," Hayes said. "Our role as a federal government should enable you to see that vision."

Hayes applauded the county's \$24 million integrated planning process that began in spring 1999 out of a need to accommodate an expected population boom that could double the number of residents from 1.5 million to 3 million by 2020.

The three-part plan seeks to identify space for about 164 wildlife and endangered species, identify the routes for four new transportation corridors, and revamp its land-use plan for the region. The process is expected to be completed in 2002.

Once completed, the integrated plan could cost billions of dollars to implement, Board Chairman Tom Mullen said, because acquiring the land is necessary to achieve the county's goal of preserving open space and building corridors will be expensive. Officials estimate that 500,000 acres will have to be set aside for wildlife, endangered species and open space.

Mullen, who attended the press conference with fellow board members, said getting commitments from federal and state officials will help secure future money for the plan.

"It really focuses these agencies in on what we are doing," Mullen said, "so there is a real buy-in here and following that will be the money."

While Hayes pledged to seek federal funding for the county's plan, Nichols said the state stands ready to support the efforts. She pointed to the recent passage of Propositions 12 and 13, which set aside billions of dollars for state parks and water needs.

Nichols said Gov. Gray Davis supports the county's plan to preserve as much of its natural resources and space as possible.

"The area where the real dollars are going to be called for (is) when it comes to buying easements and (private) land," Nichols said. "Somebody will have to come up with the money and we are committed to the county to leverage as much as we can of the bond money that has already been passed."

The pledges from federal and state officials were viewed as a good first step by Borre Winckel, executive director of the Riverside County chapter of the Building Industry Association of Southern California.

But Winckel, who also serves as an industry liaison to the county's integrated planning process, said the government agencies must come through with money.

"This partnership will fall apart unless the money follows and that's because the multi-species plan will require so much private acreage to be acquired," Winckel said, "if we don't have the money - we don't have the vehicle to do it."

He added, "We may look forward to some state and federal (support), but you heard no dollar amount mentioned."