

## ***“New plan aims to control sprawl”***

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The San Bernardino Sun

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The Associated Press

Tuesday, September 26, 2000

LOS ANGELES - Calling it a nationwide model, local, state and federal officials signed an agreement Monday to balance development with preservation in one of the nation's fastest growing regions.

The Riverside County plan provides a blueprint for the next half century for carving out new roads, erecting shopping centers and building homes while preserving rapidly disappearing habitat.

"What's happening in Riverside County today is emblematic of what's happening around the country. This is ground zero of urban sprawl," said David Hayes, deputy secretary for the U.S. Department of Interior.

The Interior Department is among 10 government entities, ranging from transportation departments to wildlife agencies, that have worked together since May 1999 to assemble the development and conservation plan for the Southern California county. Squeezed between Los' Angeles and Orange counties to the west and Arizona to the east, it covers an area the size of New Jersey with a population slightly smaller than Nebraska's.

The idea, at least is simple: Get all the agencies to agree on where development can occur and what land needs to be preserved to avoid piecemeal planning. Such planning also can help avoid costly delays and legal fights over environmental conflicts.

"When we complete this, you will be able to look at a map and see where you can build and where you can't," said Tom Mullen, chairman of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors.

Striking such an agreement between government agencies, local builders and conservationists is crucial to the future of the county, which is expected to double in population to 3 million in 20 years, he said.

The county needs to know where it can house those people, where it can build new roads to accommodate their commutes, where it can build new shopping centers and how it can do it all without trampling rare plants and animals and adding to congestion.

Failure to coordinate such planning already has been costly.

The county spent \$42 million over 13 years to buy habitat for the endangered Stephens kangaroo rat, a species that came to symbolize the often bitter clash between federal environmental law and local developers and farmers.

The plan signed Monday, called the Riverside County Integrated Project, is designed to avoid such lengthy and confrontations.

"This really is a first of its kind," said California Agency Secretary Mary Nichols. "We don't have planners understand biology or biologists who understand land-use planning, so we're creating a whole new process."

One example of how the agreement is expected to help in the future: Building a new way into Orange County to take pressure off the 91 Freeway.

Already one of the most congested corridors in Southern California, the 91's traffic is expected to increase 75 percent in 10 years. Getting all parties to agree early about where a new freeway can be built and what land must be avoided can save time and money.

"I think it gives us a chance to establish some new paradigms for how we develop, how we set aside that which needs to be protected and how we provide transportation in a place that is known for terrible congestion," said Dan Silver, coordinator of the Endangered Habitats League, a Southern California conservation group that is part of the partnership plan. "It's a place where solutions are desperately needed."

State and federal land, transportation and wildlife managers hope the Riverside County plan will serve as a model for other communities struggling with the balance of preservation and development.

Finding money to make it work, however, is likely to be the most daunting obstacle.

The county expects to preserve about 1000,000 acres during the next two decades at a cost of more than \$500 million.