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Riverside County's roadmap for development

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Growth -- whether we like it or not, it is upon us. If we don't manage it properly, our communities and our way of life could change dramatically in the coming years -- and not for the better.

It was reported recently that Riverside and San Bernardino counties represent the fourth fastest growing metropolitan area in the nation, adding an estimated 557 new residents every day. It was also reported that Riverside County converted more farmland and open space for urban development that any other county in California over the last 10 years.

Clearly a new vision is needed in order to accommodate growth while still protecting the open space and rural charm that drew many of us to Riverside County in the first place.

Fortunately, we have a key piece of that vision in the Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP). The plan protects our open space and rural character by conserving 153,000 acres, in addition to the 350,000 acres, of existing publicly owned lands to create a 500,000-acre reserve system in Riverside County. It protects more than 140 threatened or endangered plant and animal species that live in Riverside County, and increases recreational opportunities such as parks and nature trails.

The plan is also essential to getting federal and state approvals to build the new roads and freeways we desperately need to relieve the traffic congestion that is making Riverside County commuters' lives increasingly more miserable.

In addition, it offers the county and 14 cities in western Riverside County, a new, vastly-improved roadmap for development. The conservation plan replaces a protected, state and federal process, which has cost property owners and local governments millions, with a system that brings faster approval timelines and more local control of development.

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We need this new planning tool to help us control our destiny. By satisfying the requirements of the Endangered Species Act up front, the MSHCP gives us a clear picture of where development can and cannot occur.

For years, state and federal endangered species regulations have cast a long shadow over thousands of privately owned acres in Riverside County, making development of this species-rich land extremely expensive and time-consuming for property owners.

Under the MSHP, landowners hamstrung by endangered species regulations, will have the option to sell their property to the county for habitat conservation at a fair-market price. For many property owners, this voluntary process offers a chance to reap substantial economic benefit from land that otherwise would be difficult or impossible to sell or develop.

For our cities, the conservation plan offers a faster, more cost-efficient environmental review process that will help our communities grow responsibly and attract quality development that boosts the local economy.

The conservation plan offers another critical benefit that affects just about everyone in Riverside County -- traffic relief. Without conserving land for threatened or endangered species, state and federal officials will not allow new roads and highways needed to relieve traffic congestion that is getting visibly worse everyday. Without the MSHCP in place, we will also be forced to forfeit millions of dollars worth of traffic improvements that the voters, supported overwhelmingly at the ballot last November in approving Measure A.

Federal and state officials continue to support plans for the four new highways proposed in the "Blueprint for Tomorrow" largely because of the MSHCP. So the equation is simple, habitat conservation equals traffic relief.

A change of this magnitude does not come without some trepidation. But fear of change should not prevent us from replacing a flawed and onerous process with a proactive, innovative approach that protects our natural resources, unclogs our freeways and ensures quality development -- all of which improve our quality of life.

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