

“Riverside County, Calif., Links Progress With the Environment”

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SAN FRANCISCO - An ambitious plan to meet drastic transportation needs and control development while incorporating environmental mandates in Southern California's Riverside County is being hailed as a model for the nation.

The plan ultimately could result in the issuance of billions of dollars of bonds, as there county finances road and highway projects and buys land to preserve open space.

The Riverside County Integrated Project, or RCIP, maps out what is billed as “the largest smart growth plan in the U.S.” in one of the fastest-growing counties in the country.

The project targets 2,500 square miles of western Riverside County with a time frame of the next 50 years and designates areas for new roads, shopping centers, and homes. At the same time, it works on ways to preserve disappearing habitat for wildlife. Therein lies the difference, county officials say, between how things were done in the past and how they will be planned for in the future.

Under RCIP, real estate developers will know in advance of land investment where they can build and avoid potential snags associated with land that later is discovered as the habitat for threatened or endangered species. RCIP will help accomplish this by designating land for preservation for wildlife.

If the project is successful, the transportation portion of the plan alone has the potential for \$6 billion to \$9 billion of bonds. That would require the reauthorization of a local sales tax initiative that the county Board of Supervisors anticipates being on the March 2002 ballot, according to Tom Mullen, the board's chairman. Mullen said he does not know yet what form the bonds would take.

The habitat side of the plan, depending on when the county buys the land, can cost up to \$2 billion financed by bonds, he said.

The county has already spent \$42 million over 13 years to buy land where the endangered Stephens' kangaroo rat lives.

A \$90 million bond project already approved is in the last stages of review by one regulatory agency. It is estimated that \$50 million to \$60 million of it will fall under RCIP and may go to market as early as next year.

"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 the Interior, quoted in a story by the Associated Press.

The RCIP project is an alliance of 10 local, state, and federal agencies committed to balancing growth with conservation in the county. All entities signed an agreement Monday to reach a development and conservation plan.

Environmental groups, building industry and property owners' associations, and farm bureau representatives also will participate in the process, according to a county official.

"We made this a stakeholders process and so far, everyone is still at the table, although there may be differences of opinion, we are still making progress," Mullen said.

Riverside County is about as large and as populated as Massachusetts, and is located east of Los Angeles and Orange counties. If the past is any indication, Riverside County will continue its dramatic growth.

In the 1980s, the county was deemed the fastest-growing of any in the nation. In the 1990s, some 475,000 new residents made their homes in the county even as the real estate market slumped during one of the worst economic periods in the state's history. Many Riverside County newcomers have come for housing more affordable than in Orange and Los Angeles counties. Many Riverside residents make long highway commutes to jobs located in those counties.

Projections indicate Riverside's population will nearly double by the year 2020, to nearly three million residents. Jeffrey Burger, an analyst with Fitch, noted the county's population grew by 25% since 1990, and by 85% between 1985 and 1990. The growth was well in excess of state and national levels. Fitch rates Riverside County A-plus. Moody's Investors Service rates the county A1.

That growth shows the need for improved mobility as well as the challenge to maintain it, according to Mullen.

For example, a nearby corridor, the Santa Ana Freeway, currently carries 235,000 units of traffic during peak hours, however, the forecast is for 410,000 units in 2010.

Steps must be taken soon for providing transportation infrastructure, Mullen said.

But, "in order to put in any transportation needs, you have to take care of the environment," he said. "in order to move commerce and people, you have got to have another gateway through Orange and L.A. counties and you cannot do that if you do not address environmental concerns."

Thus the concept of RCIP came about.

In addition, when environmental issues are ignored, lawsuits occur.

The supervisor cited several cases where controversy over wildlife habitat and litigation have stalled large highway projects.

Interstate 710 had its first public hearing in 1949, and “it is not completed yet,” Mullen said. Highway 30 began construction this year to link local highways with Interstate 210. “The first public hearing was in 1946.” Segments of Interstate 15 were held up 10 years by legal challenges. “Nothing changed, but the cost of an additional \$1 billion.”

To make RCIP work, multiple agencies sought a protection plan covering several animal species instead of a single species, as most plans in the past have done. California has 282 threatened or endangered species. RCIP will cover an estimated 165 of those.

“There is another unique side to this project,” Mullen said. “We laid it out to be a 24 month project with a year in public hearing.”

Mullen is in his sixth year on the Board of Supervisors, after working a decade with a state legislator and in transportation. He said he is proud of RCIP and what it will do.

“If you will let environmental concerns lead, the rest of the process will follow,” Mullen said.

Mary Nichols, California Resources Agency secretary, agreed.

“This really is a first of its kind,” Nichols said in a published report. “We don’t have planners who understand biology, or biologists who understand land-use planning, so we are creating a whole new process.”