

“County plan on fast track”

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-The development of a coordinated guide to the future may begin soon.

Work on the plan that will shape the future of Riverside County could begin as early as next month.

On Tuesday, supervisors gave county staff the go-ahead to begin negotiating with companies that will gather information, conduct environmental reviews and draw plans for the Community and Environmental Transportation Acceptability Process or CETAP.

The process aims to create a guide for future development, figure out where to put roads and other transportation corridors and designate protected areas for endangered species – all at one time. The idea is to bring all of the groups interested in those issues together to come up with a plan that will satisfy everyone.

“This is a significant step,” said Richard Lashbrook, director of the county’s Transportation and Land Management Agency said. “This is process that has a lot of potential for the county.”

He expects to bring supervisors final contracts within 30 days. Once contracts have been signed, the planners will ask the public to help determine desirable goals.

Some environmental field work will begin immediately to take advantage of the springtime, the season when many plants and wildlife are most active.

The county has set aside \$7 million but officials expect the final cost could be more than double that amount. Lashbrook says the county hasn’t set a ceiling on the planning costs, and that will depend on the contract negotiations.

The count has chosen companies such as Sverdrup, SAIC, Dudek & Associates and The Planning Center to work with. Supervisors already have hired the Coachella Valley Association of Governments and enlisted its Transportation and Land Management Department and the Riverside County Transportation Commission to help direct the consulting firms’ work and provide staff support.

But before consultants can get to work, Supervisor Bob Buster said supervisors need to decide what issues they should study and set some goals.

“Do we want to try to curb urban sprawl? Reduce traffic congestion? Promote livability?” Buster asked.

The planning process aims to include federal regulators at the same table as the farmers and landowners who frequently oppose them on environmental and development issues.

Last week supervisors decided the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other regulatory agencies would be nonvoting members on an advisory committee that will oversee development of the habitat conversation plan. Earlier, the regulators had been members of an advisory committee that oversaw development of the country’s star-

crossed kangaroo rat plan, and the other interests complained that the regulators weakened their efforts to reach consensus.

But Supervisor Tom Mullen, who has been leading the planning effort, said county officials want to keep regulatory agencies in the loop.

Regulators ultimately will review the county's plans, particularly the endangered species portion, and it makes sense to have them looking over the county's shoulder, he said. At the same time, if regulators have no role in developing the plan, environmentalists might be unwilling to participate.

"It's kind of like negotiating the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord," he said. "No one trusts anyone, and we're trying to get everyone to the table."

Mullen hopes regulatory agencies can review issues in the plan as they come up, rather than waiting until all the work is done, he said. It may be the only way to finish within the two-year deadline.

"It's important they be there with us, not leading us but with us," he said.

Planning for the inevitable

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Riverside County is expected to get 1 million new residents in the next 20 years. That statistic looses an avalanche of questions. Where will they live? Where will they work? How will they commute if freeways are already crowded? Does this mean another round of endangered species wars?

The goal, of course, should be to settle the big issues like those efficiently. That's the point of an ambitious effort county supervisors launched last month, and members of the Riverside County Transportation Commission are now positioned to advance in an important way.

Under this plan, new transportation corridors are to be laid out in concert with a General Plan revision and efforts at multiple-species preservation. State and federal transit moneys are available for innovative planning like this, and the transportation work is given a lead role. The county commission's staff is recommending that it vote today to commit \$1.5 million of state cash to start identifying these corridors. This would put the commission in sync with a state financing cycle, and with a November 16 deadline for seeking federal funding, too.

The Community Environmental Transportation Acceptability Process (CETAP) stacks up as a mindset as well as a plan – a common intent to move promptly and learn from planning mistakes of the past. That makes it worth pursuing in a timely fashion.