

“Looking to a county’s future”

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Riverside County is nearly the size of Massachusetts and is larger than four other states. It is more populous than a dozen states, with topography that ranges from grassland and chaparral to mountain and desert. It is on the leading edge of Southern California’s tremendous, continuing growth. So the idea of planning the county’s land-use, transportation and habitat preservation, all at once, could hardly be a more ambitious undertaking. Every aspect of it is daunting.

But take it all together and a funny thing happens: Each big job looks less imposing. It’s not that the effort is less than the sum of its parts; this stands to be hard, costly work. But the interdependent issues grow clearer, a lot of make-work and uncertainty washes away. The comprehensive effort makes sense.

This week, after a long buildup, county supervisors and the county’s transportation commission are poised to set all this work in motion. Decisions will be called on hiring the main consultants to oversee the gathering of information and rough-cut planning work. Supervisors also intend to start shaping a lobbying campaign, building on a county delegation’s recent trip to Washington. They want to persuade the federal government (and the state as well) to make a major commitment, both financial and bureaucratic, to the process.

The fact is, that last item may be toughest thing on the agenda, but it’s mission-critical.

The county’s last good-faith attempt to meet the requirements of the federal Endangered Species Act wound up fueling intense frustrations, and consuming 10 years and \$40-odd million, much of that in developer’s fees. It yielded a lot of data, but also plan and core reserves that essentially serve just one species, the Stephens’ kangaroo rat. Landowners in habitat study areas argued bitterly that their properties were being “taken” via long-term prohibitions on use and development. Political pressures rose, and in the end the deal was only saved by the late intercession of then-Deputy Interior Secretary John Garamendi, who opened his federal checkbook to cover substantial closing costs.

Now, after a breather and a bureaucratic re-tooling, the county is embarking on two habitat planning projects – the controversial west county effort, and a parallel one in the desert. At the same time, it aims to plan new arterial routes for its far-flung 21st century population. And it hopes to create a land-use matrix that will sensibly accommodate all that.

The legal imperative of the Endangered Species Act make substantial federal participation the linchpin in the whole structure. But after just a few months of preparation, there’s already talk of budget constraints on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contributions, and the county’s foray back to Washington seems to have produced only the kind of blandishments and vague reassurances that won’t be mistaken for IOU’s.

Worst of all, the savvy Mr. Garamendi has left government service and other key Interior posts are said to have been vacated, and left unfilled, during the lengthening lassitude of the Clinton administration.

That's really not good enough. The government has to help up its end of the obligations it imposes on its citizens.

At this end, meanwhile, there is renewed energy. True, some of that energy is generated by friction, but diverse local stakeholders are still engaged in the give and take, and the Nature Conservancy, among other groups, is lending support to what it sees as a groundbreaking conservation effort. Supervisor Tom Mullen, who set much of this in motion, is talking about limiting the exposure of landowners under the habitat process. All this will help build momentum, and demonstrate a local commitment that needs, and deserves, a state-federal match.

If that makes all this something of a leap of faith right now, it nonetheless makes sense for Riverside County to take it.