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Healthy habitat plan

Don't raze a pact that balances conservation, development

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By BORRE WINCKEL

These days, habitat conservation isn't just for the birds. When most of us think about wildlife conservation, we think of the species it protects or the enjoyment of hiking through the canyons. But rarely do people think of traffic congestion relief and homeownership. In Western Riverside County, it's this commitment to good planning and conservation that's improving our quality of life.

Riverside County is one of the nation's fastest growing regions. People are trading inner-city life for a better life in our county. To accommodate new families, the Building Industry Association of Riverside County helped create a good planning framework to protect open

space and meet the needs of future residents.

The goal is to plan today to meet the needs of the future. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing well-planned communities for both new and existing residents, the Building Industry Association believes new housing projects must complement existing communities; meet guidelines regarding water availability; and include roads, parks and schools to accommodate current and future residents.

Prudent Protection

Protecting the environment is part of the overall agenda. In 1999, the Building Industry Association, the Riverside County Farm Bureau, elected officials, and the environmental community, including the Endangered Habitats League, began creating a comprehensive plan to balance growth with habitat protection. This rare

collaboration resulted in one of the most ambitious conservation plans in America.

After a five-year planning process, the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan became the nation's most aggressive habitat protection effort. It created the largest conservation plan to date, protecting more than 146 species, 153,000 acres of privately held land and 357,000 acres of publicly held land.

A 25-year endeavor, the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan is already 25 percent of the way toward achieving its goal. In only two years, 36,000 acres of privately held land already have been set aside permanently for preservation. But it's about more than just wildlife; it's about people, too.

Based on policy set by former President Bill

Clinton, the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan provides a comprehensive compliance program with federal endangered species laws, allowing us to build roads and freeways to meet future needs. Without the conservation plan, environmental compliance for necessary transportation projects would be nearly impossible, causing even more traffic congestion. The plan created a balance between protecting the environment and protecting our quality of life.

Sadly, just as we've made great strides to preserve open space, a small group of environmental

extremists is waging a misinformation campaign against the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. A few individuals want to stop progress and restore an unworkable, costly system in which frivolous lawsuits stop well-planned transportation and housing projects.

Not only would a return to this regulatory regime be costly to Riverside County taxpayers, it would be a dramatic step backward. It would move elected officials away from thoughtful planning to a patchwork system without coordination, common sense or benefit to residents.

Historic Achievement

The Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan is a historic achievement and a model for America. It proves that a comprehensive approach to land use can protect the environment and our quality of life. Home builders, elected officials and many environmental groups supported the plan when it was adopted because it represented the very best in planning for our communities. We won't walk away from it now.

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