

Cities, Agencies Unite To Help Speed Okays For Conservation Plans

An Eastern Alameda County Conservation Strategy (EACCS) for habitat preservation is being formed by Livermore, Pleasanton, Dublin, the Alameda County Planning Department, Zone 7 Water Agency and the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency (CMA).

The EACCS is designed to show, by way of the creation of a map, the location of habitat for listed species, so that developers, whether private or public, will know where to focus their efforts when they need to obtain easements for their habitat mitigation. It is believed to be an aid in speeding up the process of obtaining habitat mitigation approval for development.

The EACCS will not be a prescribed plan or requirement to be followed for mitigation. It will be an information and communication piece designed to better coordinate efforts between such agencies as state Fish and Game, and developers.

Fish and Game, the state Water Quality Control Board, and the federal Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) are charged with approving specific habitat plans as mitigation. Without that approval, the developments cannot go ahead.

The EACCS's approach will be different from the operation of the Partnership for Land Conservation and Stewardship (PLCS), which recently has been in the news. The PLCS signs up developers that are looking for ranch and farm land that offers habitat for specific species. On the other side of the ledger, PLCS also lines up ranchers and farmers who can offer qualifying habitat. PLCS basically is a listing service and an educator about what it takes to offer habitat. It also evaluates potential habitat that would be offered.

PLCS will be one of the organizations taking part in the EACCS, because it has something to offer. It does not duplicate any of the regional strategy.

GRANT COULD CUT COST BY 70 PERCENT

The process of creating the EACCS is expected to take 18 months and cost participants a total of \$400,000, spread over three phases. A major part of the cost will be for consultant Jones & Stokes, at \$279,000. However, a Proposition 50 grant is being sought to cover the fee. If that occurs, then each of the six participants would see its share of the cost cut from \$70,000 to \$20,000.

Zone 7 directors agreed at their meeting July 18 to front the money for Jones & Stokes' first phase of \$150,000, plus contributing its own regular share of \$70,000. The Jones & Stokes money eventually would be reimbursed from the other participants, if the offsetting grant application is not successful.

The Livermore City Council on July 23 approved its \$70,000 share. Mayor Marshall Kamena commented that the EACCS would have many benefits for the city. "It is a wonderful thing."

The city council has a goal to protect open space and greenbelt areas in North Livermore. Doolan Canyon is considered a priority. According to the staff report, "Resource agencies are acknowledging Doolan Canyon as a significant biological resource that could benefit from the comprehensive approach of a Resource Conservation Strategy."

Currently, project mitigation and conservation occur on a case-by-case

basis with minimal coordination among local agencies. The result is piecemeal mitigation that is less effective at preserving and connecting the open space and natural communities found in the area.

Zone 7 was motivated to front the consultant's first-phase money, because Fish and Game has implied that it will move faster to give the green light to approving mitigation for the Altamont Water Treatment Plant on Dyer Road. Zone 7 would like to open the plant in 2009. The district has been in negotiations for 18 months with Fish and Game over meeting its mitigation obligations concerning listed species habitat on its property.

SPLIT VOTE SHOWS RESENTMENT

The promise of a bureaucratic speedup in exchange for Zone 7 fronting the money to organize EACCS did not go down well with the Zone 7 board. President Bill Stevens called it "blackmail. If they want a regional plan, the state should pay, not our constituents. Why do we need land? The developers and cities should pay for this."

Some 75 percent of the cost of Zone 7's share will come from the water rate fund. The remainder from connection fees that pay for growth.

Director John Greci said that he was upset with Fish and Game. Director Dick Quigley said he agreed with Greci. Director Sarah Palmer said that since the EACCS "is voluntary, there is no reason to pay attention at all."

General manager Jill Duerig replied that "there are no guarantees. It's a strategy, not a plan. However, if the Fish and Wildlife Service says there are riparian corridors they want to preserve, it helps. We'll wind up with a strategy where we or anyone else can provide mitigation. We'll have corridors so the kit fox has places to roam, not just up and down the Walker Ranch (next-door mitigation for the Altamont Water Treatment plant)."

The board approved the proposed level of Zone 7 participation on a 5-2 vote. Quigley and Kalthoff voted no. Other directors talked about delaying the vote for a month, but decided it wouldn't change anything.

Sharon Burnham, director of conservancy for the Tri-Valley Conservancy, was asked by the Independent whether the new strategy will have any impact on it. Burnham said that she has not been in on the formation of the strategy. Public comments and attendance have not been invited yet, so she was unable to comment.

On the related item of the formation of the PLCS a few months ago, Burnham said that there have been concerns about it, in regard to whether it would be lining up any temporary easements. However, PLCS officials have been assuring people that all of the easements will be permanent, which is what Tri-Valley Conservancy wants to see.

Using public money for easements that would last only 10 or 15 years would be futile, because the idea behind habitat mitigation is to replace a habitat destroyed by development with another piece of land to ensure the species continuation, said Burnham. PLCS merely matches up developers and agencies that need mitigation with landowners who can offer them. No one in the process is make a decision about "whether the easements are permanent or not. They are just matching up (landowners with those who need mitigation). I don't have problem if they do exactly what they say," said Burnham.

Tri-Valley Conservancy is the former South Livermore Conservancy, which has expanded its land preservation efforts throughout the Tri-Valley.