



## Burrowing Into Dublin

*To protect the threatened burrowing owl, open-space groups threaten lawsuit over development of former military land.*

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Conservationists and biologists describe Dublin as an example of how not to develop. Within the past decade, they say this city at the junction of Interstates 580 and 680 has done a bang-up job of showing how land-use planning shouldn't be done, according to Alameda Creek Alliance spokesman Jeff Miller. "It's an embarrassment," Miller said. "It's tacky, it's ugly, and its rule of thumb so far has been development over any endangered species."

So in January, when a group of city officials, builders, and business leaders toured a parcel of undeveloped land known to house one of the last Bay Area populations of the unofficially threatened burrowing owl, local conservationists decided to step in and try to slow things down.

City staffers say their worries are premature. "Forget plans being set in stone, they're not even set in mud yet," said Community Development Director Jeri Ram. City drawings of potential development are merely "visions" of what Dublin would like to see, she said. "We don't even have an application from a builder yet. Then we can start the environmental studies and see what it is we actually have to worry about."

In 2003, the city and federal landowners quietly made plans to develop a 187-acre "island" of untouched wild, which is surrounded on all sides by city sprawl. NASA owns roughly ten acres of the proposed Livermore-Amador Valley transfer, tentatively scheduled to change hands by April. The rest, a fraction of Camp Parks Reserve Forces Training Area, belongs to the US Army, which gets to forgo federal land-transfer rules in any sale.

Buildings on the Army base have become dilapidated since their construction more than fifty years ago. To bring the site up to date, the federal landlords

proposed trading the suggested section of land for retail, residential, and office use to fund new construction on developed parts of the base.

To train recruits for combat, the Army kept parts of Camp Parks undeveloped, unwittingly preserving enough open space to shelter the threatened red-legged frog, golden eagle, tiger salamander, and endangered San Joaquin Kit Fox in addition to the susceptible burrowing owl.

The council has bandied about ideas since the transfer was proposed five years ago. These ideas include a dog park, outdoor amphitheater, greenhouse, or botanical garden. Other suggestions included a restaurant or open-air game area. Still, just knowing who showed up at the city's tour of the property worries area activists and a band of other open-space advocates. An Oakland Raiders representative attended the tour last month to see if it would prove suitable for a full-scale sports stadium. Afterward, Dublin Mayor Janet Lockhart said that is unlikely because her town of 43,000 is ill-equipped to cope with game-day crowds. Housing and retail developers took a look at the land, too.

In fact, though the city council began last year to talk about parks and other small-scale or open-air projects, last month Lockhart unveiled drawings of five hypothetical residential and commercial developments. Based on one of the five drawings, most of the land would house schools, homes, or stores. The only open spaces are manicured parks.

At this early stage, none of the plans require environmental review, but when Miller and others felt that the impact on wildlife was being left unconsidered, they immediately sent out a call to arms against what he deemed preemptive blueprinting.

City planners say Dublin will likely keep portions of the land undeveloped. But without sufficient say from the public, some groups have threatened to sue. "If a review comes out and we find it insufficient, we will press charges," said Miller, spokesman for both the Alameda Creek Alliance and the farther-reaching Center for Biological Diversity. "But that doesn't have to happen if we're involved from the beginning."

Miller and Alameda Creek Alliance board member Rich Cimino, who met with the Army base commander last month to talk about future land use, are taking a page from activists to their north. When federal officials announced closure of part of the Concord Naval Weapons Station two years ago, developers rushed to the drawing board. But when the Save Mt. Diablo and a coalition of community groups opposed Concord's and builders' hasty approach, every involved agency slowed down to include public comment. The protests helped alter plans to construct up to 13,000 cookie-cutter tract homes on 5,000 acres of one of Contra Costa County's few undeveloped expanses.

"What we want is for the city and potential developers to cooperate the way they did with the Naval Weapons Station," said Miller, who ideally would like to have the transfer delayed. Until the change in property owners, when the land will be zoned for public use, the hilly expanse is classified as agricultural, protecting it from extensive development.

Burrowing owls have long fallen victim to the area's burgeoning development. Biologists call the owls' population decline since the 1980s "dramatic." Housing, shopping malls, and high-rise construction have cut known owl-populated open space in the Bay Area by more than half, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Although the state rejected a petition to list the owl as threatened five years ago, independent scientists widely regard the Northern California population of the animal as in danger of dying out. According to the California Environmental Quality Act, developers, and not the city, will be required to work with the state and public to protect the burrowing owl habitat.