

Water board reviews Pleasanton wetlands dispute

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Wednesday, March 31, 2010

An environmental group is demanding that regional water regulators intervene in a Pleasanton development plan, claiming the builder has illegally filled in a sensitive wetland habitat.

The Alameda Creek Alliance has asked the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board to force the developer to compensate by buying wetlands elsewhere, such as near the Springtown Preserve in Livermore.

"The problem is, we're losing these habitats in a piecemeal way, and pretty soon we'll have lost a lot more than we realize," said Ralph Kanz, conservation director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, a Fremont nonprofit that advocates for Alameda Creek.

The developer, Alameda County, says the area is not a wetland at all.

"This group has been like a rottweiler locked on our ankle for well over a year," said Pat Cashman, the county's director of surplus property.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the nation's wetlands, issued a permit in 1993 allowing the county to fill in the area.

The area is Staples Ranch, a 124-acre, former horse ranch in the northeast corner of Pleasanton abutting the Livermore border. Alameda County bought the property 60 years ago as a possible site for the county jail, but ultimately decided to put the facility at Santa Rita. The Staples Ranch has sat vacant ever since.

In the 1990s, the county embarked on plans to develop the property, which is part of Pleasanton's long-range plan for the Stoneridge Drive area. The county's plan calls for an auto mall, a 600-unit senior housing complex, a shopping center, two parks and a recreational ice skating rink owned by the San Jose Sharks.

Money raised from the development will go toward county capital projects, such as jails, hospitals and other facilities, Cashman said.

Pleasanton's Planning Commission is scheduled to approve the final environmental report April 14, and the City Council will vote on it in May.

"We fully understand that this project will go ahead," Kanz said. "We're just saying that filling in wetlands requires some mitigation."

The area in question is a 12-acre vernal pool along Arroyo Mocho where it merges with Arroyo Las Positas, on its way from the Livermore hills to its confluence with Alameda Creek, which ultimately flows through Fremont into San Francisco Bay.

The creek and vernal pool are dry part of the year, but during the rainy season are home to a rare plant called the San Joaquin spearscale and possibly the threatened California tiger salamander. The various agencies involved in the project did not thoroughly study the area before they filled it in, Kanz said.

The regional water board is reviewing the alliance's request and will issue a response within the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, not everyone in Pleasanton is thrilled with the development plan. The primary complaint has been that it would extend Stoneridge Drive to El Charro Road in Livermore, creating a through-way between Interstates 580 and 680.

The city has not yet determined how it will address that issue, and has not taken a position on the Alameda Creek Alliance's request for mitigation, said Steven Bocian, assistant city manager.