

Burrowing owl flap challenges big Dublin development plan

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times

3/21/14

DUBLIN -- An environmental group is suing the city to overturn its approval of a 2,000-home development because of concerns over burrowing owls.

The Alameda Creek Alliance says Dublin failed to demand enough research or protections for a burrowing owl colony at the planned Dublin Crossings project on 189 acres of the Camp Parks Reserve training base.

"You can't wipe out habitat for the last large remaining burrowing owl colony in the Livermore-Amador Valley and say, 'We'll figure out later what to do about mitigation,'" said Jeff Miller, director of the creek alliance.

On Friday, Miller announced his group had filed a lawsuit in Alameda County Superior Court that challenges the project's environmental impact report as inadequate.

Ten pairs of the small owls nested in underground burrows at the development site in 2013 and as many as 50 burrowing owls have nested at Camp Parks historically, the group said.

Western burrowing owl numbers have declined for years, although the species is not listed as endangered.

Miller said the developer, SunCal, was not required to do much more than wait until after the nesting season to build over the nest sites -- to protect baby birds that couldn't run or fly away. That is not enough, he said.

City representatives declined to comment. SunCal, the developer, wrote in an email it plans to help provide new habitat for the burrowing owls.

"We have an extensive mitigation strategy, built into our EIR, for the burrowing owls which includes new habitat construction away from the project area to help direct these owls to more viable habitat," SunCal spokesman Joe Aguirre wrote.

He said SunCal is required to provide two acres of owl habitat for every one acre destroyed by development.

SunCal is acquiring the site for its development in exchange for financing tens of millions of dollars of improvements on the military base. The project is along Dublin Boulevard and north of the Dublin-Pleasanton BART station.

The burrowing owls typically reach a length of eight to 10 inches and nest in abandoned burrows dug by ground squirrels.