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Plan for habitat conservation backed by city

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The City Council jumped enthusiastically on the conservation bandwagon this week, joining a diverse coalition of supporters backing the East Contra Costa Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP).

In the works for nearly a decade, the HCP streamlines the development process and provides for more orderly conservation of wildlife habitat.

"The 'wow' factor here is off the charts," said Councilman Brandon Richey after the presentation of the plan by Contra Costa County's John Kopchik.

"This is one of the best things that could happen to East County," chimed in Mayor Bob Taylor. "This is good stuff."


The HCP represents "an almost unprecedented level of cooperation," Brentwood planner Winston Rhodes told the council. The plan has the backing of developers, property owners and environmentalists, as well the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, the town of Clayton and the City of Oakley. Pittsburg is expected to sign on in the coming weeks. The Antioch City Council voted against the plan.

Under the HCP, it will be possible to obtain permits for most development through a single point of contact rather than by seeking numerous approvals from numerous agencies, as is now required. Mitigation measures will also be more effective through the unified process, which will make it easier to assemble conservation corridors.

As many as 30,000 acres could be conserved under the plan, adding to what Seth Adams of Save Mt. Diablo called "an already robust conservation effort" in East County, one of the state's most bio-diverse regions. It

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will also allow connection of existing open spaces such as Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve and the Los Vaqueros Watershed.

Several speakers remarked that streamlining the environmental review and permitting process will benefit everyone involved.

The "piecemeal mitigation process" now in place "is a nightmare for agencies, and it's a nightmare for developers," said Sheila Lawson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "This is such a better way of doing business."

By having a more cohesive plan for protecting wildlife, Lawson added, local agencies can be more competitive when it comes to securing grant money for future conservation efforts.

Although "no one got everything they wanted," Councilman Chris Becnel said, many speakers remarked at the ability of groups with competing interests to work together. Dick Vermeer of the Friends of Marsh Creek Watershed said although there were differences of opinion, the process was marked by "civility," and "virtually everything we came up with was consensual."

In other business, the council approved the formation of several subcommittees, two of which were immediately pressed into service. Councilmen Brandon Richey and Chris Becnel will run the new Neighborhood Improvement Committee, which will review neighborhood issues including code enforcement. Following the committee's official adoption, a pair of residents asked for its assistance in addressing unsightly properties. Some of the properties are Section 8 housing, said Jeanie Green, but the problem is caused by inattentive landlords of all kinds. She also made it clear that she and her neighbors were willing to be a part of the solution, asking, "What can we do to help?"

Richey assured the speakers, and citizens who have been contacting the council in increasing numbers about the same problem, that "We hear you, and we're ready to move on this."

Also, it was decided that the city's Agricultural Enterprise Committee would consist of Councilmen Bob Brockman and Erick Stonebarger. The council then received a report on the status of the city's Ag preservation program.

The program has accumulated about \$10 million in mitigation fees for the loss of farmland in the city since 1998. It has also acquired conservation rights for 53 acres of the Ag core. About 1,500 acres of developable Ag land still exist within city limits, enough for about an additional \$8.5 million in preservation fees, or enough to protect about 7 percent of the core.

The subcommittee will review with the members of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust and consultants the options available for the program's future. Possibilities include continuing the program as it is, raising mitigation fees on the remaining 1,500 acres to increase the conservation fund, and/or re-directing the money now slated for development right acquisition into another program benefiting agriculture.

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