

MORGAN HILL TIMES

New habitat plans said to improve local land control

Monday, March 10, 2008

By Mark Noack (editor@morganhilltimes.com)

Relatively new legal tools for protecting endangered species and habitats are being prepared for approval by the Morgan Hill City Council.

According to Ann Draper, assistant operating officer at the Santa Clara Valley Water District, the proposed Habitat and Natural Community conservation plans will give Morgan Hill better control to mitigate and restore natural habitats while also streamlining environmental regulations.

Early in the decade, entering into the habitat plans was a requirement for getting federal and state approval for Highway 101 improvement projects for various local government bodies, including Santa Clara County, San Jose, VTA, the Santa Clara Water District - and later in 2005 - Morgan Hill and Gilroy.

"This will be a significant preservation of habitat and open space for our community," Draper said. "It's a habitat legacy for our community."

The plans are essentially win-win for everyone, Draper says. Developers in Morgan Hill will have an easier time by negotiating environmental impacts at a local level rather than having to go through the state.

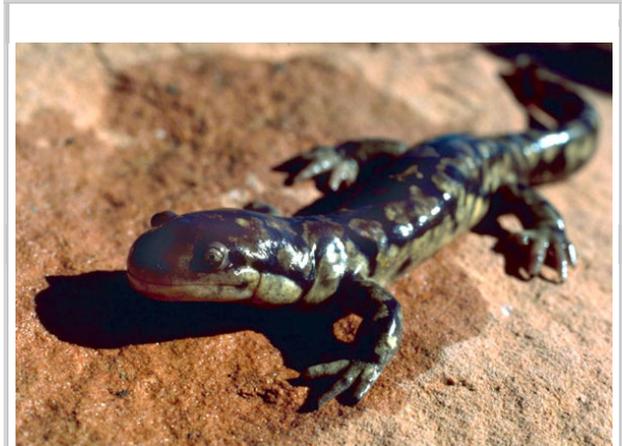
At the same time, Draper says, there will be better means to preserve and restore natural habitats and the 30 endangered species in Santa Clara, such as the red-legged frog, the tiger salamander and the bay checkerspot butterfly.

"It provides developers with certainty and the ability to get these permits in better time," Draper said. "It doesn't alleviate the need to go through the review process, but often endangered species permits can be the hardest to get from state agencies."

In 2005, Morgan Hill joined the Habitat and Natural Community conservation plans, which have been in a draft state. The plans will be reviewed by the Morgan Hill Planning Commission and City Council in mid-April.

Mark Noack

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A tiger salamander, a threatened species native to Santa Clara County, could be better protected thanks to relatively new legal tools for protecting endangered species and habitats that are being prepared for approval by the Morgan Hill City Council.

Photo by: Special to The Times