



SANTA CLARA VALLEY  
HABITAT AGENCY

## Conservation in the Works

By Matt King

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GILROY — The tiger salamander is making its last stand in South County. Thursday, Gilroy and Morgan Hill will officially join a massive planning effort that could end the constant development battles that infuriate homebuilders and environmentalists alike.

When the effort is complete, development projects should no longer be held up for years over concern for the salamander, the California red-legged frog or other endangered species, and acres of critical animal and plant habitat should be preserved.

Gilroy planner Cydney Casper said the city is entering the planning partnership with high hopes that development headaches are a thing of the past.

“What we’re going to get out of this is that we’ll be covering a long list of not just endangered, but threatened species, and we’ll get them all dealt with now,” Casper said. “It’s going to cover all of Gilroy so any future development is going to be much easier.”

The planning process is exhaustive and unprecedented in Santa Clara County. Gilroy and Morgan Hill are teaming up with the county, the Santa Clara Valley Water District, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority and San Jose to develop the regional growth strategy. What promises to be a nearly four-year effort will culminate in a state Natural Community Conservation Plan and federal Habitat Conservation Plan.

Ken Schreiber, who’s managing the plans for the county, said they will result in a more coherent and broad-based strategy to protect critical habitat in Santa Clara Valley. He said the goal is to eventually incorporate each of the county’s 15 cities, but Gilroy and Morgan Hill are the most critical because they have the most acreage. “The effort is to improve the way local governments preserve habitat,” Schreiber said. “From the standpoint of critical habitat and development impacts, the most

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sensitive land is in South County. If the county and other agencies can accomplish this, it will be a great model for the other cities.”

The conservation plans work by addressing critical habitat issues before development projects are proposed, eliminating the traditional project-at-a-time hurdles presented by state and federal regulations.

Often, development projects stall because homebuilders and regulators can’t agree on the best way to mitigate environmental impacts.

In Gilroy, for example, several housing projects planned for west of Santa Teresa Boulevard between Eagle Ridge and Gavilan College have idled for a year because developers have not met the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency’s concerns over the tiger salamander.

What the conservation plans will do is identify large tracts of county land most critical to the survival of endangered and threatened species and develop mechanisms for preserving that land. It will also set out clear requirements that developers must follow to build under local, state and federal regulations. “With HCPs and NCCPs all the requirements are set out ahead of time, so applicants know what the requirements are ahead of time,” Schreiber said. “They won’t have to go through an individual permitting process that can be lengthy and financially significant.”

Skip Spiering, a developer with Dividend Homes whose 59-house Santa Teresa project is on hold, said the conservation plans won’t expedite that project but may prove useful in the future.

“It doesn’t help us in the short term, but in the end, it really does outline a game plan that is workable,” Spiering said. “We sincerely hope this will work, but hope doesn’t sign a [permit] from U.S. Fish and Wildlife.”

A representative of The Nature Conservancy said Tuesday that the conservation plans are relatively untested, but may prove to be a great way to balance development and environmental interests.

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“HCPs are right in line with the way we work, through carefully planned ecosystem-scale conservation that brings the whole community to the table. So naturally we’re fans of the approach,” conservancy spokeswoman Misty Herrin said. “Admittedly, success can only truly be measured over time, but if they’re done right, we believe that HCPs are the most effective way to achieve long term conservation results.”

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