

Conservation groups challenge housing plan

By [Karen Pearlman \(/staff/karen-pearlman/\)](/staff/karen-pearlman/) 3:52 p.m. Nov. 5, 2013

SANTEE — Three conservation groups on Monday filed a lawsuit challenging the city of San Diego's approval of the Castlerock project, a Pardee housing plan for 430 homes on undeveloped land between the city of Santee, the Sycamore Canyon Landfill and Mission Trails Regional Park.

The 204-acre Castlerock development along Mast Boulevard, which was approved by the San Diego City Council in September, is headed toward becoming part of the city of Santee. The Santee City Council in October voted 3-2, with John Ryan and John Minto dissenting, in support of the planned community's annexation.

Padre Dam Water District got on board after Santee's OK, and approved a plan to file an application with the Local Agency Formation Commission in favor of annexation.

The lawsuit was filed in San Diego Superior Court by Preserve Wild Santee, the Center For Biological Diversity and the California Chaparral Institute against the city of San Diego, the San Diego City Council, the city of Santee and the Santee City Council.

The petitioners say the development would destroy wetlands and streams, grade steep slopes and subject new and existing residents to significantly higher fire risks.

They say they want to protect the site and adjoining areas from the environmentally damaging effects of the Castlerock development, according to Preserve Wild Santee's executive director Van Collinsworth.

Minto said "everybody agrees (Castlerock) should be annexed to Santee, but everybody was asking questions."

Minto said he voted against the annexation in part because of concerns about San Diego's approval of the environmental impact report, and possible future lawsuits by "people who go over (EIRs) with a fine-tooth comb." He was hoping the city would table the matter and discuss it in closed session, he said, but found little support.

"I think this is a stereotypical lawsuit filed by environmental groups having a difference of opinion," Minto said of the three groups' suit. "I think it's still more of the same. I've been at this 11 years, approving developments, and it's the same questions over and over again. But I want those questions answered. Why aren't we looking at these questions and having them answered? Every time it ends up in court."

The lawsuit follows a 2006 federal court ruling that invalidated parts of San Diego's multiple species conservation program, which allowed developers in southwestern San Diego County to harm endangered wildlife and plants in exchange for establishing habitat preserves.

"San Diego has had seven years to fix the broken parts of its conservation program, including its poor protection of vernal pools and insufficient funding," said John Buse, senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "We need smarter planning and more protection for people and wildlife, not more mindless sprawl."

Collinsworth said Castlerock would be built "without adequate consideration of fire-vulnerable topography and the need for safe evacuation routes from Santa Ana wind-driven fires into site design."

He said the lawsuit is intended to reduce the project's risk to public safety and the environment.

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