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Project seeks route for cars, wildlife corridor
Creating passage for animals remains Calimesa tradition

By STEVE MOORE
The Press-Enterprise

CALIMESA - The Holbert Ranch housing project could be pivotal in acquiring more land for a wildlife corridor allowing creatures like deer, mountain lions and raccoons free range between two state parks.

The project calling for 131 new homes is up for City Council approval Monday night.

It’s happening with small-town Calimesa on the verge of a huge boom. About 9,000 to 10,000 homes could go up over the next five to seven years, officials say.

Mayor Shenna Moqeet says a wildlife corridor is a legacy for future generations far beyond scattered open space, hiking, biking and horse trails.

“If you look at the rest of the cities, all they do is ‘build, build, build,’ “ she said. “They stick a little land over here, a little land over there.

“Nobody seems to care.”

If Holbert Ranch gets the go-ahead, one hurdle remains before bulldozers start grading, homes go up and Calimesa gets prized land for its wildlife corridor. Holbert Ranch still needs a main road in and out running through a proposed, nearby project: Sunset Ranch.

But a solution could be at hand.

Deal Points

Under a possible two-part deal, part of Sunset Ranch could be purchased for Holbert Ranch’s southerly access road. Sunset Ranch’s remaining acreage would become part of Calimesa’s wildlife corridor instead of becoming a housing development.

Environmentalists see Sunset Ranch as a critical east-west connection point for animals traversing the southern segment of Calimesa’s wildlife corridor. Developing the land could trigger opposition from them.

Robert Osborne, an Orange County developer and Sunset Ranch’s owner, said he has made a business decision to sell the property.

Several months ago, Calimesa officials, development interests, environmentalists and other government agencies discussed how Sunset Ranch could provide a main entry for Holbert Ranch and enlarge Calimesa’s wildlife corridor.

Osborne was asked about the value of his 52-acre parcel where 160 homes are planned. He told city officials the land was worth $200,000 to $250,000 an acre.

Calimesa requested an appraisal and Osborne hired a consultant.

The appraisal valued the developer’s land at about $12 million.

City officials said the figure was too high, according to Planning Manager Gabriel Elliott.

Money for more wildlife corridor land could come from environmental groups and possibly government grants, officials said. Calimesa doesn’t have funds for buying the land, Elliott said.

Osborne offered Calimesa the land for $6 million -- half of its appraised value. He would donate an additional $2 million and receive tax benefits.

Holbert Ranch would immediately pay Osborne $1.5 million of the $6 million for a road easement. Money from environmentalists and government grants could pay off in installments the remaining $4.5 million for wildlife corridor land, Osborne said.

The extra two or three years would make it easier to raise the funds, he said.

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The southerly access road would begin near Interstate 10 and Calimesa Boulevard with drainage pipes underneath. At build out, about 625 vehicles daily would go in and out of Holbert Ranch, which would have two access roads.

Osborne says before any deal on a road and more wildlife corridor land, Holbert Ranch’s plans must be decided.

Hugh Holbert said he continues work on getting access for his property. Once the project is approved, building conditions will be set, he said.

On Monday, City Council members will weigh an environmental impact report, a zone change and a tentative tract map laying out lots for Holbert Ranch.

**Corridor Created**

Calimesa’s 600-acre wildlife corridor belongs to a proud tradition of conservation efforts seen worldwide over the last 10 to 20 years, Elliott said. The strips of habitat have been created from Canada to Australia.

In Calimesa, environmentalists proposed a wildlife corridor and city officials immediately saw it would promote the rural living many residents like.

A wildlife corridor sprang from a lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity almost three years ago over the JP Ranch project. Environmentalists insisted that three already approved developments reconfigure things so animals could traverse the area.

The Center for Biological Diversity