



Environmental Pacts Shaken: County 2020 plan in trouble, Meadows plows habitat

Congressman Sherwood Boehlert was in town over the weekend energizing troops for his brand of pragmatic politics—the kind that gets things done.

It is no curious anomaly that this energetic 20-year veteran and survivor of the ideological plague strangling Congress today is also known as the environmental soul of the Republican party. As a solution seeker, he ventures where ideologues dare not go.

The value of the nation's precious natural resources is as practical as it is obvious to him. That is why his message reaches across the aisle.

Which is also why he looked so at home in San Diego with fellow rolled-up shirt sleeve types like Supervisor Pam Slater and Mayor Dick Murphy, who joined him as recipients of awards for environmental leadership from Republicans for Environmental Protection (REP America).

Leadership on the Board of Supervisors and the many City Councils around the San Diego region has produced national models of how to protect endangered habitat while providing builders with reasonable certainty about where they can build.

It has also lead to terrific land use deals. Environmentalists and builders figured out how to cluster development so that the most significant habitat areas were turned over to the public for permanent protection, sometimes at no cost to the public.

We were pretty proud over the weekend to show the Congressman our environmental accomplishments produced by hard won pragmatic consensus building.

And so it was dismaying that this month, two icons for such cooperative work, the County's proposed 2020 General Plan process, and the community plan that guides development of the Meadows Golf Resort, are in trouble.

Two weeks ago, The Meadows Golf Course at Del Mar, owned by Manchester Resorts, was cited for 22 municipal code violations by the City of San Diego for allegedly bulldozing native habitat without a permit in the Coastal Zone in spite of several orders to stop work.

Manchester representatives said that city contractors building a horse trail dumped the dirt first, and they were forced to stabilize the situation. Stabilization included the installation of tee boxes that lengthened two fairways. A creek bed was also partially buried.

The explanation, now contained in a numbing stack of cross-complaints, did not pass the smell test for the City Councilman and two local planning boards.

Uncharacteristically, Councilman Scott Peters held a press conference demanding that the bulldozers stop after code enforcement officials apparently could not grab anyone's attention at the golf course for three weeks.

The 15-member Carmel Valley Planning Board, which includes developers, realtors and residential representatives, issued a unanimous request for the City Attorney to pursue stiff penalties for proven violations, require full restoration of the area and seek further fines to help other community open space areas.

The Del Mar Mesa Planning Board followed suit, with only three dissenters, citing violations of the community plan, and asked for the resignations of the Meadows representatives on their board which is charged with upholding their community plan.

Both boards expressed outrage at the betrayal of agreements painstakingly crafted in the past among people highly suspicious of each other in the mid-1990's.

Construction of The Meadows and its future resort in the old Shaw Valley was held up for a decade because the area served as both a wildlife corridor linking Los Penasquitos Canyon to Penasquitos Lagoon, and as a recreational hiking and horse riding area.

A vote of the people was required to allow construction of a hotel that would make the golf course commercially viable. The politics simply was not there — few community planners or environmentalists were willing to give up a lovely and environmentally sensitive area for a golf course and resort.

And then, an idea floated out of then-Mayor Susan Golding's office—if the golf course was built according to environmentally sensitive plans, and the hotel could generate \$12 million for open space acquisition through a room fee, would environmentalists and community groups sign on to a ballot measure approving the resort?

In short, the answer was yes. The ballot measure passed with most hands on deck. And the golf course was delivered as promised. Designed around a variety of endangered habitat areas, it became a great course for golfers during the day, and a fine playground for critters at night.

Its very existence served as an example for other municipalities that golf courses could not only exist with sensitive habitat, but could help provide significant wildlife corridors. A perfect meeting of environmental, recreational and economic interests—until now.

Back at the County, another trauma to the art of pragmatic politics is unfolding as a fragile coalition planning the pattern of future growth in rural San Diego is in danger of coming unglued.

On September 24, the Supervisors will consider whether to change course from the smart growth principles underlying a Working Plan crafted during years of negotiations by stakeholders to replace the County's outdated General Plan, and shift uses for as many as 20,000 thousand pristine acres to one and two acre estates.

This would invite sprawl at its worst because estate housing demands the most infrastructure for the least housing opportunities.

It would also surely give credence to claims that rural lands cannot be trusted to the County's stewardship. Nervous conservationists are already talking about abandoning the General Plan update ship if the rural lands they seek to protect are traded away.

If so, they will surely sign onto an initiative making its way to the March ballot that would enforce rigid urban limit lines around rural lands—a draconian idea that applies a meat cleaver when surgical precision is needed.

Having built a preserve system with the best kind of pragmatic politics, there is no reason for either the City or the County to retreat on commitments to habitat and rural land conservation. The next time the good Congressman comes visiting, we should have even better things to show him.