



The Ross Retort

by Lisa Ross

BAD NEWS FOR SAN DIEGUITO: SD MAYOR ROWS DOWN NEW RIVER VALLEY

Move over, San Dieguito River Valley Park. There's a new kid on the block capturing the political hearts, minds and focus of San Diego's political establishment looking to acquire safe environmental credentials, a berth previously reserved for our own San Dieguito River Valley.

This week, San Diego Mayor Murphy announced in his State of the City address a new parkland initiative for the San Diego River Valley—note, not the venerable San Dieguito River Valley, which meanders from Del Mar to Julian, but the sadly degraded gully that runs through Mission Valley to the bay, starting somewhere in the mountains northeast of Lakeside.

The announcement was jolting for many used to former San Diego Mayor Golding's annual exultations in her State of the City addresses over the thirty year effort to create a 55-mile parkland trail from Julian to the ocean at Del Mar.

In fact, some people thought the Mayor Murphy just jumbled the word "San Dieguito," since the description of the new River Park through Mission Valley could have been lifted from an earlier Golding paean to San Dieguito.

While the Mayor claimed the new San Diego River Park initiative as his own, the vision really belongs to Michael Beck of the highly respected Endangered Habitats League who has worked for several years against brutish forces to get the ball rolling for another 55-mile habitat park patterned on the San Dieguito River Valley model.

But Beck, a low key behind-the-scenes kind of guy, is likely delirious that this born-again environmental Mayor is putting his imprint on the idea, and certainly he would resist any suggestion that the San Diego River project might compete for political attention and conservation money with the San Dieguito River Valley which he and his organization have always supported

Yet, in times past, politicians from left to right fell all over themselves to grab environmental credentials riding the San Dieguito River Valley tide and taking turns serving on the Joint Powers Authority that supervises the lands acquired by the public.

The change in focus from the guy setting the City of San Diego's agenda cannot be ignored since so much of the land yet to be acquired for the San Dieguito River Valley Park lies within the city's borders.

And so, it is fair to ask why and how this political no-brainer fell off this Mayor's map.

It is possible that the San Dieguito River Valley effort is a victim of its own success, having already acquired a substantial amount of land, mostly east of Lake Hodges. Through a beautifully coordinated effort, over 50,000 acres out of a proposed 80,000 acres are now in public ownership.

The San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, a nonprofit foundation, is headed by one of the smartest guys in town, and the 25-year-old organization is among the best of its kind in assisting private property owners interested in contributing property to the park.

As a result, many take it for granted that the other 30,000 undeveloped acres within the planned parks boundaries are already protected or that the very well oiled set of organizations working on the San Dieguito River Valley Park have enough financial and political wherewithal to finish the job, a dangerously erroneous perception, particularly in light of the recent land grab County redistricting plan that has placed too much River Valley land in the hands of County Supervisor Bill Horn, a man far more comfortable with concrete than greenscape.

Some conservation activists complain that success has bred a complacency and clannish atmosphere within park support groups and the Citizens Advisory Council to the Joint Powers Authority that fails to encourage wider citizen participation and the acquisition of the most threatened but exciting properties thereby strangling broader enthusiastic political support and dampening fundraising opportunities.

But, it is also true that many of the key properties not yet acquired for the park lie on the west end of the valley, in the most politically contentious, expensive and development intensive section of the proposed park, a good time for those public officials who eschew controversial positions and offending powerful campaign contributors to take a powder.

Among the development threats to the west end of the proposed park include plans to expand the Fair Grounds, interest in developing an additional twenty soccer fields that would require severe grading of rolling hills and habitat, an El Camino Real widening project that so far has no landscaping plan and the demolition of an historic bridge.

There is no more important time for people who live near and around the San Dieguito River Valley to give with their time, attention and check books to advance the efforts to protect this exquisite river valley and get this regional park back on the Mayor's radar screen.

The San Dieguito Valley Park Conservancy can be reached at (858) 755-6956 e-mail: sdrvlc@pacbell.net