

Ahmanson Ranch Project: Environment vs. Housing Shortage...Who wins?

There is an area in Southern California nestled between the Santa Susanna and Santa Monica Mountains known as Ahmanson Ranch. It is located in Ventura County just across the Los Angeles County border, about 35 miles from downtown Los Angeles. This area of rolling hills, wetlands, natural grasslands and over 1,000 oak trees is home to rare plants and animals as well as Chumash Indian Burial Ground. Who could imagine that a place with such beauty and serenity would be involved in one of the lengthiest and complex disputes over land use in California history.

It all started in 1992 when Ventura County Board of Supervisors certified a Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) and approved a housing development on the Ahmanson Ranch property. This new city would occupy 2,800 acres containing 3,050 residences, 150,000 square feet of office space, two golf courses, three schools and a hotel. Immediately, several lawsuits were filed disputing the environmental review process. Over the next 5 years the lawsuits were either settled or dismissed. In 1998, the land was acquired by Washington Mutual Bank, one of the largest savings and loan bank in the United States and it seemed that the project would move ahead. Then in 1999, populations of the Red-Legged Frog, an endangered species, and the San Fernando Valley Spine flower, a species thought to have been extinct for 70 years, was discovered on the land. Ventura County had to prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) to address these new issues not included in the original report. In February of 2002 the public once again challenged the project. But despite 6000 pages of written comments and 4 volumes of oral comments made during the public hearings, the SEIR was adopted and the project was approved again in December 2002. But that didn't stop the environmental groups from continuing their protest. Six new lawsuits were filed in January 2003 challenging the certification of the SEIR. This time around, there was a discovery of potential perchlorate contamination. Plus the traffic prediction in the 1992 FEIR had already been surpassed and was at the levels predicted for the year 2010. If these lawsuits moved forward, it would cause further delay of the project that was slated to begin in 2004. At this time, the state of California was in a position to buy the land back from Washington Mutual thanks to Proposition 50, which was passed by voters in October 2002 that provided funding to purchase open space. On October 1, 2003, local officials, environmentalists and local citizens joined the Governor in announcing the purchase of Ahmanson Ranch for \$135,000,000. In early 2004, the now protected land of Ahmanson Ranch Park was open to the public.

This never would have happened if it wasn't for the people who took a stand for our quality of life. During the 10 year span, many battles were lost by the environmentalists and conservationists but they never gave up. With each set back, they worked harder to gain more support. By 2002, there were 5 communities, 7 environmental organizations, 5 homeowner associations and 9 elected officials opposing this new city. Noted television and movie celebrities became involved. The Ahmanson Project became front page news. In a very competitive banking industry, image is very important. WaMu was in the process of expanding to the East Coast marketing itself as being a "community" bank, looking to improve communities by sponsoring neighborhood clean up projects, and

offering a variety of mortgages to low and middle income families who are first time home buyers.

Steven W. Weston, a legal consultant for Washington Mutual stated, “ There is a critical housing crisis in Southern California. This planned community would help meet those needs.” But, whose needs would have been met? This was to be a luxury housing project with less than 674 units categorized as “low income” that would include 300 “granny flats”, one room apartments attached to luxury homes and 50 single room occupancy homes expected to be used for the golf course workers. The remaining “affordable units” would be 2-3 bedroom homes. Most people who would have worked in this community could not have afforded to live there including, teachers, firefighters and police. This meant people would need to live elsewhere and commute. There is one freeway corridor through the area and it was estimated that 45, 000 more cars would have clogged an already overwhelmed freeway since there is no train or bus service. And since this freeway cuts between 2 mountain ranges, there is little chance of a major highway expansion It had become clear that this project would not benefit anyone except Washington Mutual, since they are the largest mortgage lender in the country. Jan Breidenbach executive director of the Southern California Assoc of Non-Profit housing said she was loath to criticize any project that brought additional housing to SC. “ We believe in increased density. In fill housing, transit-friendly housing. We believe in real low income housing where families can afford to live. A massive housing project that is not going to provide housing for those in need it most is not one that strikes me as a good idea.” Ron Beck of California’s Department of Water Resources agrees that Southern California needs more housing. “You have to build; you can’t always say “not in my backyard. But you can do it more efficiently.”

Sources:

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