

Wrapped up in Riverpark

The Signal News, June 16, 2004 by Judy O'Roarke & Lila Campuzano

About 20 adults and several children rallied outside City Hall on Tuesday, calling for motorists to honk their horns for frogs and to "Save the Santa Clara River" as public hearings resumed for the proposed Riverpark development on the North shore of the Santa Clara River.

"I'm here to lend our name to the water quality issues" said Dr. Shelley Luce, director of science and policy for Heal the Bay.

"The local organizations are doing a great job starting to make people aware of issues."

They need the support of the rest of the community, people need to be aware that changes occurring along the Santa Clara River are going to affect their quality of life.

Melanie Winter director of The River Project a nonprofit organization formed to work on watershed issues in Los Angeles County, said people who moved to the Santa Clarita Valley to escape the ills of overdevelopment in Los Angeles need to be proactive.

"I think people are starting to realize what's happening around them," she said.

"People will be facing the exact thing they ran from before their kids are in middle school.

The demonstration prompted sometimes deafening honking from motorists on Valencia Blvd. with signs that read "Honk if you love frogs" "No Water! No houses!" and "Schools Now! Homes Later!"

One sign that read "late for dinner again" pictured a grid locked Santa Clarita Valley

Riverpark proposed by the Newhall Land and Farming Co., would extend Newhall Ranch Road eastwards from Bouquet Canyon Road and add 430 homes and 744 apartments units to about 700 acres of land that run along the North shore of the Santa Clara River.

Environmentalists oppose it for several reasons, urging the city to designate the area as a park and connect it to Central Park to the North.

Newhall Land officials note their project would help extend the cross-valley connector an under construction east west roadway across the valley and that current zoning would allow much denser construction than they are proposing.

The Planning Committee had taken a month long hiatus from a series of public hearings on the project while staff members prepared answers to questions they posed during the earlier round of hearings.

But commissioners tussled Tuesday night over the issue of water availability before throwing the hearing open for public comment

Commissioner Trautman wanted an expert from the state Department of Water Resources to speak on the issue of water, but she also called for a consultant from the Planning and Conservation League to address the commission.

"(Among)" issues I am concerned about are the claims of the water availability," she said. "I don't see the environmental perspective in the State Water Project."

"What I hear and what I read is: "Don't worry, Everything's fine. The water will be there," Trautman said, but she expressed skepticism about these reassurances.

Commissioners Dennis Ostrom, Tim Burkhardt and Rick Winsman argued against extending the invitation to a conservation consultant.

"I'm not interested in a debate," Burkhardt said I'm interested in a qualified water person,"

"I think we're looking for controversy here", Ostrom said.

"I'm looking for more clarification," Trautman said.

Despite voiced opposition from the majority of the commissioners, Ostrom, and Chairman Michael Berger voted with Trautman to invite a Planning and Conservation League speaker to the next meeting set for June 29th. Winsman and Burkhardt abstained

The commissioners also accepted five letters about Riverpark, all in opposition and took testimony from about 8 members of the public.

"I think a school needs to be included in this project," said John Gonzales a resident of the Emblem area of Saugus, which is just over a ridge to the north of the planned development

Emblem residents have complained that students from Riverpark would attend their school, which was designated to serve the immediate area and is difficult to access.

"They should build at 120 percent to 130 percent of the projected student increases," said Valenica resident David Lutness.

"Developments are often named after what they displaced." Winter said, "Riverpark will certainly displace both."