



## RIVERSIDE: Initiative would conserve, develop La Sierra Land

A group of equestrians ride along a trail on 650 acres of private land adjacent to the Hidden Valley Wildlife Area in western Riverside on Wednesday, April 2. A proposed ballot measure would allow up to 1,950 homes on the property while permanently protecting a separate 650 acres as open space

BY ALICIA ROBINSON STAFF WRITER Published: April 03, 2014; 03:15 PM

A ballot initiative in Riverside is being pitched as a way to control growth and preserve La Sierra's hills at the city's western boundary.

But it might be better described as a trade-off.

Proponents, including former mayor Ron Loveridge and former city councilwoman Nancy Hart, are highlighting the measure's promise that 650 hilly acres in La Sierra bordering [Norco](#) would forever remain open space for hiking and horseback riding.

In exchange, 35-year-old development restrictions would be lifted from land abutting the Hidden Valley Wildlife Area on Riverside's northwestern edge, potentially allowing a Las Vegas developer to build up to 1,950 homes.

Opponents say even with the pledge to protect open space, the possible added homes – and the people and cars that come with them – would be too much and would harm nearby equestrian properties and the wildlife area.

The measure may finally come down to numbers.

If supporters can get 18,000 signatures before August, voters will have to decide whether permanently preserving more than half of the 1,300 acres in question is worth more than tripling the number of homes now allowed on the properties.

Loveridge said voters should consider the proposal because it “respects the river bottom and the western hills, you have open space that’s part of the proposed development and amenities, (and) you have middle-class housing choices.”

## ‘NOT SPRAWL’

Approved by city voters in 1979, Prop. R restricted development in the Arlington Heights greenbelt and Rancho La Sierra to protect Riverside’s agricultural heritage and prevent urban sprawl. In 1987, an initiative to tighten Prop. R’s provisions – known as Measure C – was passed after some supporters thought the council had ignored or manipulated the rules.

The new ballot measure would remove Prop. R and Measure C restrictions from the 650-acre La Sierra Hills and 650-acre La Sierra Lands, also known as Rancho La Sierra. Developer Terry Manley hasn’t proposed a specific housing project yet, but the new measure would let him start studying what to build, said Tom Mullen, a former Riverside County supervisor working for Manley and promoting the initiative.

The measure would turn the now privately-owned hills into public open space and only allow building on 400 acres of the rancho, meaning 900 acres would stay vacant, Mullen said.

The measure also would cap development at 1,950 homes on the 400-acre area. Mullen said current rules permit up to 562 homes on the entire 1,300 acres. He also noted that if the measure were to pass, the open space would be preserved whether or not Manley gets a project approved by the city.

Leading proponents George Reyes, a Riverside attorney, and Loveridge said the measure is an example of smart growth and a rare chance to save privately-owned land from development. The property is owned by Chuck Cox and Bill Davis, but Manley said he is under contract to purchase it.

“It’s not sprawl. It’s planned development with controls and parameters,” Reyes said. “It’s anticipating growth and trying to deal with it in a rational way.”

On March 28, supporters began collecting signatures to get the measure on the city’s November ballot.

## FRICTION EXPECTED

Opposition already has begun to sprout among some who live in the area and others who use its trails.

“Maybe if you live in another area of town it sounds OK because it’s not in your backyard,” said Laura Densmore, who has lived in La Sierra for 38 years and represented the area on the city council from 1990 to early 2004.

She and her husband, Bill, live down the street from the La Sierra Hills, where they venture daily to walk their five dogs or ride horses. Neighbors keep goats, quails and guinea hens that flap over the fence and wander into the road.

Some of Densmore's riding friends share her concerns as well as a sense of having been down this road before.

They hate to deny anyone the ability to develop their property, but "That's what's so wonderful about this area, that we're not all packed in here," said Joyce Steele, who was riding her horse at the wildlife area on Wednesday, April 2.

Steele lives in the city's greenbelt, which also has growth restrictions.

They're worried about the impact of hundreds of extra cars on local streets and friction between current residents with animals and new ones who might object to noise and odors. Also, the land that would be developed abuts the wildlife area, which Densmore said is bound to have an impact.

La Sierra resident Diane Cloud said she's been to her share of meetings about projects proposed for the area.

"Every few years some developer comes in and wants to change the plan," she said. "What's wrong with open land?"

## VOTERS' CHOICE

Others question who would bear the cost of utility services to the proposed new homes.

Kevin Dawson of the Friends of Riverside's Hills, a group that has sued the city over Prop. R and Measure C provisions, pointed to the city utility's water conservation measures and an ongoing expansion of the sewer plant.

"Why are we being forced to conserve?" Dawson asked. "Is it just so we can free up water supply for developers?"

Concerns about traffic also may arise in neighboring [Norco](#), where Mayor Berwin Hanna said Riverside drivers already cut through town to get to Interstate 15. When he heard the number of homes the proposal would allow, Hanna said, "Wow. That's a lot."

But some Riverside residents appreciate what they see as the straightforward approach of letting voters decide.

"People get to have a say," said John Brandriff, who ran for the area's council seat in 2011. "It seems like that's the best choice possible."

He said what the ballot measure allows – an average of three homes per acre – is less dense than typical urban zoning. When the final project goes through the city planning process, the number of homes could drop far below the 1,950 cap, he said.

Brandriff argued that the citrus greenbelt was the real target of Prop. R and Measure C, and La Sierra was dragged in later. But Densmore dismissed that suggestion.

“It’s in,” she said. “People voted for it.”

Mullen pointed out that current zoning allows homes on the entire property.

“I don’t see another possibility of saving these hills,” he said. “This type of thing doesn’t come along. It just doesn’t.”

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## BALLOT BOX BATTLE?

A new group called Citizens for Balanced Growth is seeking to place a measure before Riverside voters in November that would affect development in La Sierra.

**CONSERVATION:** The initiative would zone the 650-acre La Sierra Hills as public open space and create a network of trails.

**DEVELOPMENT:** Up to 1,950 homes could be built on flat portions of the 650-acre La Sierra Lands. Hills would be preserved and space set aside for senior housing and public facilities such as a school.

**VOTE REQUIRED:** Because of earlier voter-approved growth restrictions, the issue must be decided by election rather than by the City Council.

**INFORMATION:** 951-248-7190 or [www.citizens4balancedgrowth.com](http://www.citizens4balancedgrowth.com)