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GUEST COMMENTARY

A compromise plan for preserving Rancho Guejito

By Howard Kozloff

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I have been watching from afar the controversy surrounding the eventual use of Rancho Guejito, near Escondido. As a former Southern California resident, I know firsthand the passions that are stirred when vacant land is brought to the forefront of discussions on issues of growth, image and the environment. With Rancho Guejito, these passions are proportionate to the 36-square-mile property; in other words, the passions are extreme, the ramifications enormous.

But, the debate seems increasingly to center on an either-or scenario – either you preserve the land in its entirety as a state park or preserve, or you allow unfettered development to consume the unique environment contained within the property lines of Rancho Guejito.

The potential solution, however, rests in advancing conservation of the natural landscape by accommodating limited development. Simply put, the model works, as evidenced by two large-scale, still-evolving land developments: a 20,000-acre Northern California land preserve of rolling hills and an 18,000-acre barrier island in South Carolina.

Both projects show the ability of development to effectuate the long-term preservation and management of important land holdings characterized first and foremost by natural beauty.

In South Carolina, Palmetto Bluff places homesites, a village center, amenity buildings, and a small inn all within the larger realm of a coastal low-country environment surrounded by rivers and approximately 11,000 acres of wetlands buffers, managed forests, conservation easements and dedicated open space. And, at Palmetto Bluff, ruins of early plantation houses were embraced, rather than demolished.

Palmetto Bluff is a “place,” not a project; a coastal village within a vast protected natural landscape. At Rancho Guejito, the same can hold true, creating place through the natural environment and through existing features, such as the Native American cultural remnants on the site.

In Northern California, the 20,000-acre Santa Lucia Preserve set the standard for conservation-based development when it eschewed plans for thousands of production homes in favor of 280 private homesites, an equestrian ranch center, other amenities, and a permanent land trust. The trademarked “community preserve” was endowed by the development of the homesites to permanently conserve 18,000 acres of coastal

landscape. The long-term development plan succeeded in a highly anti-development community environment. Higher value was placed on the homesites due to their location within the larger preserve. As a result, the community had its landscape preserved as part, rather than in spite, of a viable development plan.

While the land-conservation community is not motivated by profits, these community preserves demonstrate that limited development can be the economic engine that sustains the preservation of natural resources. The key is incorporating human settlement as an integral part of a healthy rural ecosystem. These solutions work; they are profitable, while at the same time they protect and preserve the integrity of the land.

New projects do not get built unless there is a strong belief that they will be profitable or massive public subsidies are available.

In an age of significantly depleted municipal budgets, there is little realistic belief that a governmental organization will have the resources and wherewithal to sustain an additional maintenance expense. Especially in California, where state parks are facing severe budget cuts.

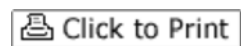
For Rancho Guejito, decreasing the number of residential units and stepping back from a commodity-based production process has multifaceted benefits. By making it about the “place,” and respecting history, culture, tradition and the natural setting, the potential exists to reduce risks by shortening construction (and approval) timelines, allowing greater flexibility through phasing to adjust to changing market demands, and creating unique products and environments tied to the qualities of the land. The resulting community functions and appears more like a village inside a national park than it does suburban sprawl.

The key to compromise over the future of Rancho Guejito lies, as paradoxical as it may sound, in recognizing that opposing sides can have the same viewpoint. Limited sensitive and contextual development actually benefits the community at-large by ensuring the long-term viability of conserved land.

Kozloff is manager of development strategies and director of operations at Hart Howerton, an international strategy, planning and design firm based in New York, San Francisco and London. The firm is the master planner and architect for Santa Lucia Preserve and Palmetto Bluff and has no role in Rancho Guejito.

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