

Paradise Valley 'new city' project would hurt desert

Desert Sun July 13, 2019 Gail Wadsworth Guest columnist

Planning agencies in Riverside County have exhibited a pattern of choices that has not benefited residents currently living in the eastern Coachella Valley and instead perpetuate a social and physical divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Approval of development choices, such as the Paradise Valley proposal, focus on the upscale and can result in gentrification in rural regions like the Coachella Valley.

Eastern Coachella Valley residents are about 97% Latino, with 85% speaking Spanish at home. Members of these communities face high rent burdens, poverty burdens and pollution burdens.

The concentrated poverty of the eastern Coachella Valley contrasts with the substantial contribution made by its hard-working residents to the entire region's vital economic engines: the agriculture, tourism and goods movement industries. The eastern Coachella Valley is a major hub for Riverside County agriculture, producing more than half of the gross agricultural value of the county at over \$500 million annually. While most of the valley's tourist attractions are located in the western Coachella Valley, the eastern Coachella Valley provides the workforce for the tourism and retirement industries. For their labors, residents earn annual median household incomes around \$29,000.

The Coachella Valley is clearly divided into two halves by all measures of social wellbeing. The eastern Coachella Valley includes the city of Coachella and the communities of Thermal, Oasis, Mecca and North Shore, along with many small scattered mobile home settlements.

Housing in California is in short supply and unaffordable for those in poverty. When available, affordable rental housing is frequently substandard. Substandard housing presents its own environmental and health risks, but there's also a segment of the population living in “informal” housing in rural regions completely lacking in infrastructure, with unsafe electrical connections and a lack of potable water and safe sewage systems. Poor people and people of color reside in substandard housing at a disproportionate rate.

The Coachella Valley offers an opportunity to develop innovative approaches to sustainable development and rural smart growth in an equitable manner. Communities in rural regions need to be planned holistically, extending resources of all kinds to low population, low-income regions. Food, potable water,

wastewater systems, paved roads, parks, sidewalks and street lights should not be considered luxuries.

Our concerns about the Paradise Valley development are numerous, and our opposition revolves around impacts that approval of such a development will have on existing east valley communities, as well as the entire valley's resources and development future.

The project will strain existing Coachella Valley resources which would be better and more appropriately used in providing services and infrastructure to existing communities and in proximity to other transportation corridors, water systems, and electricity systems — where such investment continues to be desperately needed.

The project will divert critical investments away from existing communities. More specifically and significantly, the public investment needed to sustain Paradise Valley will divert critical resources away from existing unincorporated communities nearby. Riverside County has taken great strides in recent years to increase infrastructure development in eastern Coachella Valley communities, but all stakeholders know that much more is needed. Diverting the county's scarce resources to Paradise Valley will be a substantial setback for existing communities.

We believe the project will likely result in stalled development for the entire Coachella Valley. The approval of Paradise Valley — which we and others do not believe has followed the requirements of the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan — would put at risk future development in the desert. Paradise Valley doesn't help those in the Coachella Valley who need housing the most: those who fuel the financial engines of the region and who live on low wages. Many of these residents are living in crowded and substandard conditions, others are living in "informal" housing units. All deserve to be housed in a dignified manner.

Paradise Valley does not address the lack of affordable housing in the Coachella Valley. In fact, it represents form of rural gentrification.

The Planning Commission should uplift the county's existing unincorporated communities, conserve existing public resources and deny the Paradise Valley project.

Email Gail Wadsworth, executive director of the California Institute for Rural Studies, at gwads_worth@cirsinc.org