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Parties split on Vail Lake proposal

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VAIL LAKE ---- Environmentalists think of Vail Lake, six miles east of Temecula, as one of the largest and most sensitive areas left in the region, because of its unique blend of native plants, wetlands and woodlands.

But Temecula developer Bill Johnson sees the property as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to showcase Western Riverside County as a premier golf and Wine Country resort, while preserving a majority of the area in its natural state.

Johnson submitted a proposal to the Riverside County Planning Department last week that maps out his vision for the nearly 7,500 acres along Highway 79 South between Sage and Pauba roads. The plans call for 5,172 houses, condominiums and apartments to be built near the 622-acre lake.

Three 18-hole golf courses ---- one would be private ---- are planned for nearly 784 acres north of the lake, and 209 acres are reserved for public facilities, including an expansion of local roads.Plans also designate 428 acres for commercial, employment and recreational space, 95 acres for schools and 48 acres for parks.

An 11-acre water park with private and public marinas and a 21-acre lakeside recreation area are also being proposed. And approximately 4,550 acres are earmarked for open-space preserves, including 407 acres for a biological preserve, 457 acres for a vineyard preserve and 157 acres for a woodland preserve all blended throughout the project.

"It's really a priceless and one-of-a-kind property," Johnson said last week. "I'm trying to master-plan a Wine Country around the lake to really show our area as a (combination) of Silverado, Pebble Beach and Napa Valley."

County project planner Cindy Thielman said the proposal is in the very early stages and the county has not begun its review. But she acknowledged that the property is in "a very sensitive area."

Despite Johnson's plan to preserve approximately 60 percent of Vail Lake for conservation, his proposal was blasted last week by environmentalists, including Dan Silver of the Endangered Habitats League in Los Angeles. Silver is a member of the county's Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan advisory committee.

The habitat plan represents one-third of the county's three-year, $29 million integrated planning process that also seeks to identify four new transportation corridors and revamp the

county's general land-use plan. The process is expected to be completed in 2002.

The advisory committee recently endorsed a sweeping 153,000-acre conservation proposal aimed at protecting 164 federally protected and endangered species and foliage. The plan takes in the Vail Lake property.

The Board of Supervisors approved the proposal Tuesday, despite a need for $1.5 billion to buy the land.

Silver said the Vail Lake development has no chance of being built and referred to the project as "leapfrog" planning. The term is used to describe areas of development that aren't directly connected to existing roads, water and sewer lines.

"I think that there is an air of unreality about it," Silver said.

But Johnson argues that property owners in the region have the right to develop their land and said the advisory committee has unfairly targeted privately owned land in the 153,000-acre plan in an effort to devalue the property and pick it up cheap at a later date.

"It's an enormous property rights issue," Johnson said. "Why are these properties being targeted and who ends up with them at the end of the day? These groups are spending ($29) million on this plan, so they are spinning the story."

Silver counters that developers like Johnson should know better than to buy land earmarked for conservation use because the potential for financial losses is high if the property can't be developed.

"This is land speculation of the highest order," Silver said. "A safer investment would be savings bonds or land designated for development."

Losing millions of dollars on a land venture is not new to Johnson and he's not anxious to head down that path again. But he wants his rights as a property owner acknowledged by all parties involved in the integrated planning process. Johnson filed for bankruptcy a few years ago after a failed land venture in the Santa Rosa Plateau, west of Murrieta that ended with the property being controlled by the nonprofit Nature Conservancy.

Several million dollars was spent acquiring and trying to develop the property, Johnson said, but because the land was earmarked for conservation, its worth dropped to the point that "no lender would lend on it and no buyer would buy it." He said the property ended up being sold for about "10 cents on the dollar."

Johnson's property rights crusade led him to propose a "property rights memorial" near the center of Temecula. In July, he unveiled a plan that calls for a large plaque to be placed on a hill next to the Temecula Duck Pond and city park. He has not yet formally applied to the city to erect the monument, however.

Johnson and his wife, Tish, own 14 acres south of the popular city park and plan on using the memorial to call attention to the plight of property owners throughout Southern California, who they say have been forced to give up their land to make way for endangered species preserves.

"I'm not going down without a fight this time and that is for sure," Johnson said.

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