

Targeting Rural and Suburban Development

Environmental activists file legal actions against a massive suburban development in the East Bay and a road-widening project in Northern California.

Camp Parks, a mostly undeveloped section of open space in Dublin, is one of the last remaining large breeding grounds for the burrowing owl in the East Bay. Once plentiful in area grasslands, the burrowing owl has been driven from its natural habitat over the past half-century by suburban sprawl and tract-home developments. The newest threat to the bird is a massive, 2,000-home planned community to be built by SunCal developers that was approved last fall by the Dublin City Council. However, the environmental group Alameda Creek Alliance hopes to protect the owl from being further decimated, and filed a lawsuit last week against the city.

The legal action challenges the city's approval of the project's environmental impact report, and contends that the Dublin Crossings housing project fails to adequately protect the second largest breeding colony for the burrowing owl in the East Bay (Altamont Pass is the largest). "A significant number of owls breed in the project area," said Jeff Miller, executive director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. Miller noted that about two to three dozen owls nest at Camp Parks every summer. "This is a significant population."

In addition to 2,000 homes, Dublin Crossings would feature a large commercial development on about a total of 189 acres of land. Much of the area is a mostly undeveloped section of a former US military base, and SunCal has agreed to add \$66 million worth of improvements to the remaining military installation.

Before the lawsuit was filed, SunCal officials defended their development against criticism from the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Our plan for development of the Dublin Crossing community is sensitive to wildlife and the environment, and we are striving to ensure that the burrowing owl population in this area continues to be viable," SunCal spokesman Joe Aguirre told local news site Around Dublin Blog.

SunCal has plans to set aside other portions of Camp Parks for a new burrowing owl breeding ground, but the Alameda Creek Alliance contends that the proposal doesn't go far enough and that more land is needed for the bird to make up for the habitat it will lose. The burrowing owl, a ground-nesting bird that prefers mostly flat grassland habitat, nests primarily in abandoned ground-squirrel burrows. Although the number of burrowing owls has dropped precipitously in the East Bay during the past several decades, it is not listed on the state or federal Endangered Species lists. Instead, it receives lesser protections as a "species of concern."