

Friant Ranch deal: New money for recreation projects along San Joaquin River

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By Marc Benjamin

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An agreement has been reached between the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust and Friant Ranch developers that will end a legal challenge over Fresno County's approval of the 2,270-home project.

Under the agreement, Friant Ranch will charge a one-time, \$500 fee on each home to provide a park fund. That money will be used to restore and maintain recreation projects along the San Joaquin River Parkway.

The agreement still doesn't clear the way for Friant Ranch to get built. Separate lawsuits filed by the city of Fresno and the Sierra Club have been appealed and remain unresolved.

When county supervisors approved Friant Ranch in February 2011, they said it would generate hundreds of jobs and become a model for good land-use planning. But following its approval, the proposed development sparked three lawsuits with more than 25,000 pages of documents.

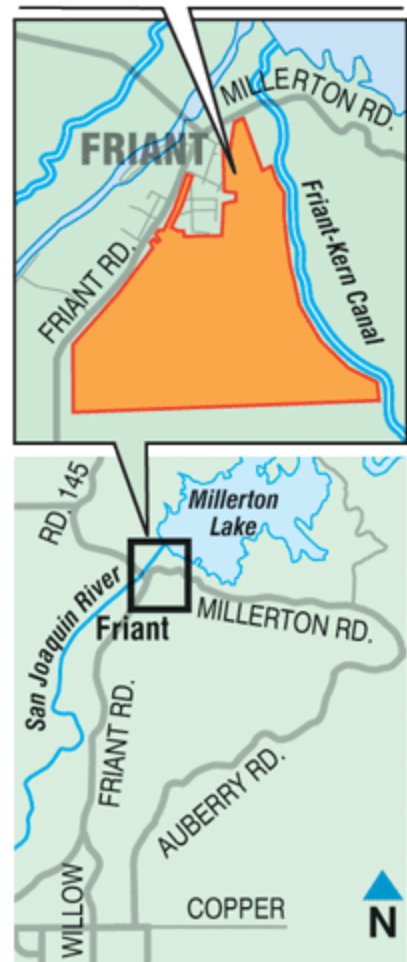
In 2012, a Fresno County Superior Court judge ruled that the project's environmental document failed to investigate impacts to nearby recreational areas, which already are heavily used and in need of maintenance.

But in a statement released Thursday, parkway trust officials said they will drop their legal objections to the county's project approvals in exchange for the fee, which will raise \$1.1 million for a park fund.

"This is a precedent and we hope a turning point for the region

Friant Ranch

The proposed 2,500-home development near Friant geared toward people age 55 and older has cleared a legal battle.



THE FRESNO BEE

to put parks at the forefront as major infrastructure for our community's way of life," said Dave Koehler, the River Parkway Trust's executive director. "The way Friant Ranch is designed is going to be very attractive for folks who want to use the outdoors."

The 480-acre mixed residential housing project includes an 18-acre commercial center, a 16-acre recreation and fitness center and 13 miles of walking and biking trails next to the existing rural community of Friant.

"Our biggest concern was that the project be designed for the residents to use Lost Lake Park and the surrounding parks," Koehler said.

Friant Ranch has been owned by the Bigelow-Silkwood family for more than a century. Bryan Wagner, lawyer for the development, said the homes will range from large single-family lots to apartments.

"They want to build a nice project for people who want to stay here in their retirement," Wagner said.

The project is planned for active residents age 55 and older with proximity to Millerton Lake, the San Joaquin River, trail networks and Table Mountain Casino.

"We have strived to protect the San Joaquin River and are pleased to reach this milestone agreement with the River Parkway Trust," Dennis Bacopulos, representative for the project, said in a prepared statement.

The agreement also was encouraging to Andreas Borgeas, chairman of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors. He said he expects the fee revenue will be used for operations and maintenance of parks and trails in the Friant area.

"Any time there's an opportunity to settle a legal dispute involving development and its impact on our natural environment, it's a benefit," he said.

Appeals in the lawsuits by the city of Fresno and the Sierra Club are expected to be heard later this year.

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