

Editorial: Placer conservation plan is a landmark for region

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Conservation planning sounds good on paper, but for an elected official, it can be a political nightmare.

To create a solid plan that offers certainty to both developers and environmentalists, local officials must draw lines in the sand. They have to declare which areas are best suited for habitat to be preserved, and which land is best suited for housing and other development.

Not many elected leaders are up to that task, but in [Placer County](#), they are. Last week, [county supervisors](#) approved the [Placer](#) County Conservation Plan, a true breakthrough in collaborative efforts to guide growth in a farsighted fashion.

Eight years in the making, this blueprint would guide land-use decisions for the next 50 years in western [Placer](#), including the city of [Lincoln](#).

Some 25,000 to 46,000 acres would be added to the 16,000 acres already set aside for long-term conservation. These include sensitive vernal pools – seasonal wetlands home to a rich menagerie of plants and animals, including the endangered fairy shrimp – and grasslands that support a variety of birds. Protected areas would be connected, preserving entire landscapes.

The plan also promises important benefits to developers and builders. As much as 57,000 acres could be opened up for development. Because the plan would comply with state and federal laws on [endangered species](#), habitat conservation and clean water, developers could get all their environmental permits at once, cutting the process in half – to six to nine months. That will help them with financing, since they'll hold solid assurance their projects will actually happen. In return, developers, through land donations and mitigation fees, would pay the estimated \$1.6 billion bill over 50 years.

Environmentalists and developers rarely agree on much, but both support the conservation plan as a way to avoid endless and expensive combat in the courts.

[Terry Davis](#), conservation program coordinator for the [Sierra Club's](#) Northern California chapter, calls the plan a "real win-win."

[Steve Frisch](#), president of the [Sierra Business Council](#), calls it "a tremendous step forward."

Indeed, the plan could be a model for the region and state. But the lesson in [Placer](#) shows the importance of leadership.

Both Davis and Frisch give particular credit to Supervisor [Robert Weygandt](#), who has helped shepherd the plan from the start, for more than half his 15 years on the board.

That political fortitude is not found everywhere. A habitat conservation plan for south [Sacramento County](#) has been in the works for 17 years, off and on. There's finally a draft plan, and predictably all sides have likes and dislikes. There's also a new committee of elected officials to help get the plan over the finish line. They should look to [Placer](#) for guidance and inspiration.

[Placer's](#) plan is the product of eight years of hard work. There were times when it appeared the effort might fall apart, especially in June 2005, when a joint letter from state and federal wildlife agencies said the proposal was unacceptable.

The new plan addresses the agencies' concerns point by point; those involved are very hopeful the plan will pass muster this time.

If all goes well, it will go into effect in 18 months or so. That timing could be ideal, giving [Placer](#) a leg up when the region's economy finally recovers. Other jurisdictions should take notice