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Marin Voice: County leaders failed by approving Dipsea Ranch without full report

By **JUDY SCHRIEBMAN** |

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The headwaters of the Redwood Creek watershed, above Muir Woods National Monument and adjacent to Mount Tamalpais State Park and the historic Dipsea Trail, are not only treasured by Marin residents but by visitors from all over the world.

Marin County officials, though, appear not to care. County planners used a shortcut to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) regarding a newly approved subdivision, called Dipsea Ranch, which would essentially allow up to four very large expensive houses and up to 12 total new homes in this internationally recognized biodiversity hotspot.

I believe the Board of Supervisors acted in violation of CEQA when it approved Dipsea Ranch with only a superficial initial study, rather than the legally required environmental impact report (EIR). An EIR would fully examine the potential impacts of the subdivision and require protections for the location's fragile landscape and habitat.

The plaintiffs, Watershed Alliance of Marin and Friends of Muir Woods Park (a group of concerned local residents), filed a lawsuit last year and the opening brief last month to contest the "initial study-mitigated negative declaration" and void the approved subdivision. The Sierra Club also supports this suit.

What is so special about this location?

The proposed Dipsea Ranch subdivision borders 1,500 feet of Redwood Creek headwater streams, home to Central California Coast coho salmon, a local critically endangered species facing extinction. These streams lead to Muir Woods and Muir Beach, where the federal government has spent millions of dollars to rehabilitate coho salmon spawning habitat.

The project site also contains a wetland that has ecological characteristics that likely qualify it for protection under the Federal Clean Water Act. The site is extremely steep (almost 40% slope), contains several documented landslides, and is in an extreme fire-hazard location. The proposed subdivision jeopardizes protected wildlife and is inconsistent with neighboring parklands and density policies for this fragile and unique part of Marin County.



- The initial study considered the impact of only two additional homes. There was no consideration of the very real potential impacts of a total number of 12 units (allowed by right) on the developer's property, without any further environmental review.

The county has approved what will most likely end up being six times the density allowed by the countywide policy.

- Despite a letter submitted by the National Park Service requesting a thorough analysis of the project's potential impacts to native special status plants and animals, the initial study never addressed whether those species would be affected. The county ignored the consultant's own biologist's findings of potential impacts from earth movement to downstream endangered coho salmon and streams as well as the federal and state recovery plans.

As residents of Marin County, we should all be aware of how the county is representing our best interest. Many of us choose to live here, first and foremost, because of its natural beauty. Sustainable development cannot occur if the county continues to resist its duties to provide adequate and legally required oversight of proposed development in sensitive locations.

However, in addition to the county's inadequate review of this project, in the last few years, the county has also made several decisions threatening the environment that were later overturned in court. These suits included the county inadequately protecting coho salmon streamside habitat in Lagunitas Creek and not abiding by its own recreation plan regarding the Alto Bowl.

I urge the county to reconsider and commit to protecting Marin's cherished environment by fully implementing and enforcing CEQA and its own general plan.

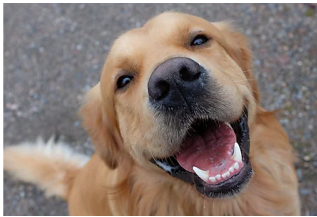
For more information go to Watermarin.org.

Judy Schriebman, of San Rafael, is a member of the Sierra Club Marin Group Executive Committee, Watershed Alliance of Marin and Gallinas Watershed Council.

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