

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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East Bay owl advocates protest birds relocation

Protesters say removal of the birds from a development site amounts to a death sentence.

By Katherine Tam
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 01/03/2010 04:31:21 PM PST

Updated: 01/04/2010 08:00:00 AM PST

About 40 owl lovers gathered Sunday afternoon near partially developed land in Antioch to protest the eviction of burrowing owls.

Friends of East Bay Owls and other supporters donned owl masks and waved "Give a Hoot, Not the Boot" signs as motorists honked or pulled over to inquire.

Kiper Homes, developer of the planned Blue Ridge neighborhood, is removing the owls by installing one-way doors on the birds' burrows that will allow them to leave but not return, under a plan sanctioned by the state Department of Fish and Game. Once the owls leave, wildlife biologists will destroy the burrows and fumigate for ground squirrels.

Owl activists say the move amounts to a death sentence.

"These owls here are not being relocated, they're being evicted," said Scott Artis, an owl advocate. "They're vulnerable to red-tail hawks, cats, coyotes. Without shelter, they're left open to anything that could be harmful."

Catherine Portman, executive director of the Burrowing Owl Preservation Society, said she will ask Attorney General Jerry Brown to intervene and stop state officials from breaking environmental laws. She is gathering signatures in support.

Once built, Blue Ridge will hold 127 houses on roughly 25 acres at McFarlan Ranch Drive and Canada Valley Road. Construction halted in May 2008 after the land was graded as residential lots, with sewer lines, streets, curbs and sidewalks installed. Work is to resume in the spring.

Eleven owls live here year-round, Artis said. Eighteen more come here during breeding season.

Fish and Game considers burrowing owls a "species of special concern," but they are not an endangered species. They are protected from hunting, and their burrows are off-limits during nesting season, which runs from February to October.

The environmental consultants working with Kiper Homes say the birds adapt to frequent relocation and will be able to find homes elsewhere.

"We do it in a systematic manner until all the burrows are collapsed and the owls are moved out," said Geoff Monk, a certified wildlife biologist who has been working with nesting birds of prey for 30 years.

Owl advocates aren't convinced and want a supplement to the project's 14-year-old environmental report that analyzes the impact on the owls and includes mitigation measures that protect the birds.

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Ron Bruno, of Martinez, uses binoculars to get a closer view of burrowing owls during a protest on Ashbourne Way on Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010, in Antioch, Calif. The Friends of East Bay Owls held a protest next to the 25 acres of undeveloped land owned by Kiper Homes. Eleven burrowing owls have made their homes at the site of the proposed housing subdivision. More than 40 activist gathered at the chain link fence surrounding the property. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Staff)

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More than 40 activist gather at the chain link fence surrounding the Blue Ridge housing development during a protest on Ashbourne Way in Antioch, Calif., on Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010, in Antioch, Calif. The Friends of East Bay Owls held a protest next to the 25 acres of undeveloped land owned by Kiper Homes. Eleven burrowing owls have made their homes at the site of the proposed housing subdivision. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Staff)



Jon Ridler, of Martinez, and Berkeley residents Jane Kelly and Tom Kelly, from left, show their signs during a protest on Ashbourne Way on Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010, in Antioch, Calif. The Friends of East Bay Owls held a protest next to the 25 acres of undeveloped land owned by Kiper Homes. Eleven burrowing owls have made their homes at the site of the proposed housing subdivision. More than 40 activist gathered at the chain linked fence surrounding the property. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Staff)



Helene Feil, of Pleasant Hill, gets some help from her husband Bill Feil as she wears a paper owl mask during a protest on Ashbourne Way on Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010 in Antioch, Calif. The Friends of East Bay Owls held a protest next to the 25 acres of undeveloped land owned by Kiper Homes. Eleven burrowing owls have made their homes at the site of the proposed housing subdivision. More than 40 activist gathered at the chain linked fence surrounding the property. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Staff)