



# Council backs conservancy goal of land preservation

## Ventura to create unfunded plan to acquire open space

By Kevin Clerici  
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The Ventura City Council strengthened its relationship with the Ventura Hillside Conservancy early Tuesday, agreeing to include the group's goal of acquiring open space in a new city improvement plan.

Responding to a request by the Ventura land trust, the council voted 6-1 to create an unfunded capital project for land purchases and include it in the city's new five-year capital improvement plan.

Proponents described the effort as largely symbolic, stressing that the cash-strapped city didn't have any money to offer.

But having a city-endorsed project, even an unfunded one, would illustrate the city's commitment to open space and should better position the nonprofit conservancy or the city to obtain the type of federal and state grants or bond money that has helped other communities purchase open space, Councilman Bill Fulton said.

"This really pushes the ball forward for open space conservation in this community," said Stephen Svete, president of the conservancy's board of trustees.

The vote came shortly before 1 a.m. as the council discussed and ultimately approved the new capital improvement plan, which traditionally has focused on basics such as road and sewer improvements.

Councilman Neal Andrews cast the lone no vote on the conservancy request. Andrews said he supports the conservancy and its mission to preserve the privately owned hillsides and picturesque canyons above the city, but he couldn't endorse Tuesday's proposal because it "could be perceived and interpreted by the community as a commitment of real money."

"I will have a hard time getting behind a place-holder project that implies to the community a commitment of a substantial size and nature that I am not sure we can come through with," he said.

Mayor Christy Weir shared similar concerns but favored the idea after it was suggested that the proposal contain clear language that the city would not be committing taxpayer funds.

Public Works Director Ron Calkins described the proposal as unusual and said he didn't think that the city needed such a capital project to go after grant or bond funds.

But Barbara Harison, the land trust's executive director, said the city's commitment would help it be more competitive at developing resources and fundraising. "Collaboration is the important thing," she said.

The conservancy in December received its first donation of hillside land since its founding in 2003 — a 1-acre parcel near Grant Park.

Councilman Ed Summers said he had no problem adding the unfunded project to the city improvement plan because Ventura's natural setting is one of its greatest assets and preserving the environment is a top community priority.

"This sends a strong message to potential funding sources that we support this," Councilman Brian Brennan said.



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