

# Colton land gets green light to develop after decades on hold due to endangered fly



This undated

file image provided by the City of Fontana shows the inch-long Delhi Sands flower-loving fly. AP Photo/City of Fontana, File

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COLTON >> The decades-long struggle to free several hundred acres of land halted by the breeding rights of a one-inch fly on the endangered species list has finally ended after 21 years, unlocking a major economic engine for the city, but not without a hefty personal and financial cost to some landowners.

“My dad acquired this piece of property in 1975, and it was always his dream that this property would be sold to fund his and my mom’s retirement. They were married over 50 years,” said Lori Pierson Cripe about 14 acres of family-owned land on Pepper Avenue tied up for more than 20 years.

A permit issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Monday and approved by the Colton City Council on Tuesday as part of the West Valley Habitat Conservation Plan came 13 years too late for her father’s dream. He died at age 79.

“When he was on his deathbed I whispered in his ear, ‘Go ahead dad. You can go now. The Pepper street property will take care of mom,’” Cripe said about the loving fable told to her father so he could rest in peace.

But the land was years from being legally unlocked, and her mother, now 92, might not see that dream materialize either.

“It’s good news, I guess ... . It’s been bittersweet,” Cripe said. “I’ve personally been involved in it for at least 25 years ... and it’s for a sand fly.”

Since 1993, a protracted battle has been waging between the city and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect breeding land for the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly, which sits on the endangered species list. The nectar-feeding fly once bred on miles of sandy soil and sand dunes in the area, much of which has disappeared because development.

In 2010, the stalemate between Colton and federal officials finally began to thaw, said Councilman David Toro, who has been spearheading the effort.

The final agreement requires Colton to set aside 50 acres of breeding habitat for the endangered fly in exchange for development of 416 acres near the 10 Freeway at Pepper Avenue, where Arrowhead Regional Medical Center sits. Within that acreage about 80 acres can be developed, about 250 acres already developed may be redeveloped without additional studies, and a six-acre segment of Slover Avenue must be closed and used with seven acres of the 33-acre Hermosa Gardens Cemetery as part of the 50-acre breeding habitat, a city report says.

The permit issued Monday by the federal government is valid for 30 years and gives the city a green light to issue developers permits, according to city Development Services Director Mark Tomich.

Colton is in the process of purchasing land to create the breeding habitat.

“It’s just a great feeling,” Toro said, comparing the closing deal to this year’s Super Bowl finish. “I’m a New England Patriots fan and I was getting ready to fall into a depression with 20 seconds left, but with that interception it was a great feeling. I feel like I just won the Super Bowl.”

The bittersweet win for the Cripe family means meeting with an Orange County developer interested in buying their land to build senior housing.

The city plans to continue moving forward with long-planned developments critical to Colton’s economic base, such as the California University of Science and Medicine, expected to open its doors in fall 2016, a Valero gas station, an LA Fitness gym and a former car dealership turning into a retail shop and county offices.

“This is almost like the final frontier for Colton to develop,” Toro said. “If we do this right, we’ll be able to develop a base out there that’s going to be the economic engine of Colton ... . I think it’s the most significant thing that’s ever happened since I’ve been here, and that’s been 26 years.”

Colton is soliciting interest from developers, some of whom have shied away from the complicated entanglement, for the remaining acreage.