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Settling for nature. Pasadena-based Spirit of the Sage Council wins environmental protections for Upper and Lower Arroyo Seco

By Judy Seckler , Staff Writer

According to a settlement with Pasadena officials, the Spirit of the Sage Council has won major concessions that will lead to greater environmental protections for the Upper and Lower Arroyo Seco.

The settlement came after the nonprofit organization headquartered in Old Pasadena filed a lawsuit nearly a year ago challenging the city's Arroyo Seco Master Plan, which calls for construction of soccer fields, bike trails and new roads, among other things.

Leeona Klippstein, executive director of the Spirit of the Sage Council, a coalition of environmental organizations and Native Americans dedicated to defending and conserving native plants, animals sacred lands, said that the terms reached were important. However, Klippstein said her organization had been watch dogging the issue for 10 years and "would not stop."

In the settlement, the Sage Council agreed to stay clear of preserving portions of Central Arroyo, home of the Rose Bowl and a potential location for a future NFL team. "When push came to shove, we had to pick our battles," Klippstein said.

Although affluent residents living near the Rose Bowl have shown a desire to curb further traffic and noise in the area, they did not financially assist the Sage Council. Nor did the Audubon Society, the Rose Bowl equestrians or the Sierra Club, she said. The city agreed to pay the Sage Council \$25,000 for attorney fees and legal costs. The settlement stated that if a NFL team locates to Pasadena, the city will pay the council \$50,000 in support of educational programs related to preserving the environment. The money could not be used for additional lawsuits or salaries.

The settlement also calls for the city to conserve one acre of habitat for every acre impacted by the various Master Plan projects.

Assistant City Attorney Mirabel Medina said that as city impacted certain habitats, it would replace them on a one-to-one ratio. "There's very specific habitat to protect and restore," Medina said.

The terms also require the city to consult with public agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers, the US Department of Fish and Game, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, or whichever agency has jurisdiction over a given project area. Notice must be given prior to the start of a project to ensure proper environmental protections. In the past, according to Klippstein, the city tried to avoid involving those regulatory agencies for the issuance of permits. But Medina said she took exception to that criticism, saying that the city had "always followed state law consulting other public entities with jurisdiction.

"We agreed to engage in more detailed consultation," Medina said of the settlement.

However, Hugh Bowles, a member of the Hahamongna Watchdog Group, sided with Klippstein. "It's a shame it takes court to get the city to follow through on governmental agencies," Bowles said.

Other settlement terms leave the Upper Arroyo substantially undeveloped. Other terms also stipulate that there will be no expansion of Johnson Field; no new trails or roads built; and that revegetation efforts be made in the field's periphery.

A lookout for hikers and foot traffic would be built near Flint Wash Bridge and Devil's Gate Dam, and the Frisbee Disc Golf Course would be relocated further south to lessen or eliminate the negative impacts to the heritage oaks.

"We're going to save the city a lot of money by not building million-dollar soccer fields," Bowles said.

He added that the overall significance of the settlement was the point that the city could not override government regulations concerning the use of open space. "The settlement forces the city to act more responsibly toward open space. It can't carve it up and use it," Bowles said.