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Skechers developer cooperating on environmental concerns, Sierra Club says

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By LAURIE LUCAS
The Press-Enterprise

The developer of a huge footwear warehouse in Moreno Valley is cooperating with the Sierra Club to solve potential pollution, noise and energy efficiency problems, said the attorney for the environmental group.

"The city has been less (cooperative)," said Raymond W. Johnson, a Temecula-based lawyer representing the Sierra Club.

Litigation has tied up the construction of a 1.8-million-square-foot warehouse since February when the Sierra Club sued the city of Moreno Valley to stop a Skechers USA Inc. distribution center south of Highway 60, between Redlands Boulevard and Theodore Street.

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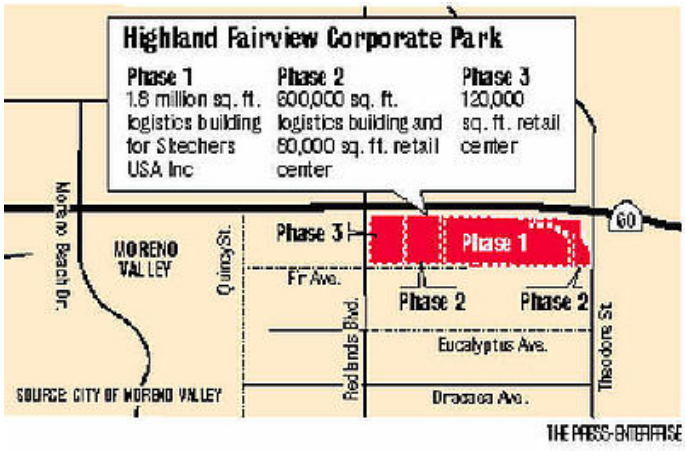

The environmentalists also named the developer, Highland Fairview Properties LLC, as an interested party.

A judge has postponed a hearing scheduled for Monday in Riverside Superior Court until Sept. 25.

The lawsuit asks the city of Moreno Valley to throw out its approval of the project and redo its environmental impact report.

The Moreno Valley City Council unanimously approved the Highland Fairview Corporate Park on Feb. 11, which environmental activists find unacceptable.

City Council members either underestimate the project's potential environmental hazards of greenhouse gas emissions, exhaust and global climate changes or "made bad decisions based on bad information," Johnson

said. "I have more issues with the city than with the developer."

Moreno Valley had no response because its policy is not to comment on pending litigation, spokeswoman Michelle Dawson wrote in an e-mail.

Johnson said he's had "very good" discussions with the president of Highland Fairview, Iddo Benzeevi, whom he describes as "cooperative, willing to work with the environmental group. It's likely we could have gotten this settled if the city hadn't dragged its feet so much. This has upset Iddo incredibly."

Benzeevi's Los Angeles-based attorney, Ken Bley, said he wasn't authorized to comment without permission from his client, who is traveling and unavailable.

The project has roiled the community since Skechers planned to move its global distribution operations from Ontario to Moreno Valley. The developer said the project will generate more than 2,000 jobs, including four vice presidents and their teams; $1.4 million in annual tax revenue; $45 million in public works improvement; and $157 million in annual economic activity.

Opponents argued that besides being an urban blight and fouling the air with fumes and noise, the project would offer mostly low-paying jobs and pave the way for more warehouse developments along Highway 60. Critics say that corridor is ill-suited to handle excessive truck traffic.

Supporters of the warehouse said that even if Skechers located in a neighboring city, Moreno Valley would still be stuck with the fallout of traffic jams and compromised air quality -- and wouldn't receive the economic boon.

Some Moreno Valley residents launched a recall in May of Councilwoman Robin Hastings, whom they accuse of supporting the project after the developer donated money to her election before she voted. Highland Fairview gave money to the Moreno Valley Taxpayers Association, which then paid for slate mailers, print ads and phone banks that backed Hastings.

Hastings denied doing anything unethical and said the contribution was spent independently of her campaign committee and without her consent or knowledge.

Recall proponents must gather signatures of 4,400 registered voters in Hastings' 3rd Council district to put the issue on the ballot.

Reach Laurie Lucas at llucas@pe.com or 951-368-9569.