

By Andrew Christie

On July 1, The Tribune's front page was occupied by a richly deserved tribute to San Luis Obispo Natural Resources Manager Neil Havlik on the occasion of his retirement.

It is appropriate to applaud his legacy: 6,500 acres of natural open space and hiking and biking trails.

It also should be mentioned, per Dan Buettner's book "Thrive," that Neil Havlik's legacy is one of the primary reasons for the high levels of personal well-being and maximized quality of life that led to San Luis Obispo's designation as the happiest city in America. Not a bad retirement gift.

But the article fostered a potential misconception: that the Natural Resources Protection Program created 17 years ago as the result of a tussle between economic and environmental interests — a "messy and intense" struggle that gave birth to the co-equal positions of natural resources manager and economic development manager — was a fight that ended in 1995, and today the forces of development and preservation function in automatic equilibrium. (The "two apparently contradictory positions ... now work cooperatively, as protecting and promoting the city's natural resources are an essential part of its economic vision.")

Those who recall more recent city history, such as the 2004 to 2006 fight to maintain the integrity of natural open space and the concept of passive recreation in the Conservation and Open Space Element might beg to differ with that conclusion. Likewise, the Johnson Avenue area residents who rose up in 2007 to beat back the proposal to develop the upper reaches of the hillsides that dominate the community.

As recently as 2011, a proposal was floated to move the Natural Resources Program into the Park and Rec department (a park and natural open space are two very different animals) and demote the position of natural resources manager, terminating that equilibrium of co-equal interests "meant to strike a balance between development and preservation."

In each instance, people had to stand up and say, "No!" In 1993, it was San Luis Obispo residents saying "no" to the idea of city policy dominated solely by an economic development manager that started the messy two-year fight, which created the Natural Resources Program and made it co-equal with Economic Development. This created the space in which it was possible for Neil Havlik to make the visionary deals that preserved 6,500 acres of open space and wildlife habitat.

That fight was based on the awareness that environmental protection is a long-term concern that rarely corresponds with the short-term needs of cash flow, quarterly profit goals, or keeping share prices high and investors happy. Nor are "protecting and promoting" necessarily the same thing, a fact well known to those city residents witnessing Bishop Peak being loved to death thanks to the nationwide promotional efforts of the city and the Chamber of Commerce. Those efforts generated a level of use for open space far out of line with the surrounding neighborhoods that the open space was meant to serve and negated the purpose of preserved open space: the chance to make a quiet connection with nature. (In a 2008 Tourism Analysis Report, the county identified the consequence of "Tourism Backlash" from traffic and crowding.)

San Luis Obispo's economic special interests did not completely change their outlook on life