

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

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March 15, 2010

SMMC Attachment
04/26/2010
Agenda Item 9(a)

Mr. Erick Lopez and Ms. Jennifer Driver
Department of City Planning
City of Los Angeles
6262 Van Nuys Boulevard, Room 351
Van Nuys, California 91401

Support for the Proposed Baseline Hillside Ordinance in the City of Los Angeles

Dear Mr. Lopez and Ms. Driver:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) supports the City's efforts to reduce the intensity of new development in hillside areas, preserving the character of existing neighborhoods and the integrity of the natural terrain. Too many projects have been permitted to dramatically alter native landforms, with severe geological, hydrological, biological, and aesthetic consequences. The proposed Baseline Hillside Ordinance provides reasonable limits on excessive development and enhances the Conservancy's ability to protect our natural resources.

Throughout the eastern Santa Monica Mountains in recent years, large houses have been squeezed into ever-smaller lots in existing neighborhoods. Prior to development, vacant lots serve as safe passages for wildlife movement between large habitat blocks. Increasing the intensity of development compromises this wildlife movement, which is essential to maintaining genetic diversity in large public parks, such as Griffith Park. Oversized houses consume a large percentage of the lot and leave side yards that are too narrow to facilitate wildlife movement. As new houses tear the web of passageways, the cumulative impact on wildlife populations is significant.

The proposed FAR guidelines would properly restrict the scale of new houses on small lots. Under the old rules, a house can be substantially larger than the size of the lot it sits on. For example, currently a 5,000 square foot lot can support a 7,000 square foot house, no matter the terrain. On a steep hillside lot, that requires excavating a large cut of earth and exporting thousands of cubic yards of dirt off the mountain. Hauling so much soil impedes access to hillside areas during emergencies and accelerates deterioration of narrow roads. The resulting overbuilt structure is often an unsightly tall block utilizing every buildable inch of the lot. Under the proposed ordinance, the maximum FAR would vary according

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to the suitability of the lot for building, with steeper lots supporting smaller structures. This common-sense approach will limit development to a level appropriate for the lot, without restricting the economic use of private property.

Additionally, the proposed ordinance would restrict the total amount of grading allowed without a variance. Currently there is no limit to the amount of earth a developer can import or export from the project site. This oversight results in mega-projects that transform the natural terrain instead of working with it. People living in the hills generally value their natural setting, but individual projects are allowed to destroy the landscape for everyone through excessive grading. Grading affects natural drainage patterns and soil composition, which inhibits growth of native plants. Large projects generally also include complex retaining wall configurations that leave the site unpassable to wildlife. By decreasing the quality and quantity of wildlife passages, the present rules fail to protect public resources. The proposed rules provide enough leeway for developers to create a feasible building pad that compliments the terrain without removing the very hillside that attracts residents in the first place.

Overall, this ordinance proposes reasonable limits on hillside development. The City would be wise to adopt the new rules to preserve one of its defining features. The Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan calls for letting the land dictate the use instead of imposing human uses on the land. The proposed ordinance follows the spirit of the Plan by encouraging houses to fit the terrain. The Conservancy supports the City in its efforts to protect the character and integrity of its hills.

Please accept this staff letter until the Conservancy's Board approves its full comments. Please direct all future materials regarding this proposed ordinance to me at the letterhead address or contact me by phone at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Edelman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

PAUL EDELMAN
Deputy Director
Natural Resources and Planning