

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

RAMIREZ CANYON PARK
5750 RAMIREZ CANYON ROAD
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA 90265
PHONE (310) 589-3200
FAX (310) 589-3207



January 24, 2011

Mr. Jon Foreman
Department of City Planning
City of Los Angeles
200 North Spring Street, Room 601
Los Angeles, California 90012

**NBC Universal Evolution Plan
Draft Environmental Impact Report
SCH No. 2007071036**

Dear Mr. Foreman:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) is responsible for open space planning in the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, which abuts the subject project on its southwest and southeast sides. Along with our joint powers partner, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), the Conservancy is one of the principal agencies involved with the revitalization of the Los Angeles River. As part of a regional growth management strategy, the Conservancy is generally supportive of infill development that accommodates residential and commercial uses in already urbanized areas. The Universal City site is ideal due to its proximity to existing transportation infrastructure (Metro Red Line and Hollywood Freeway) and status as a regional jobs center. However, the Conservancy strongly objects to two major configurations of the project footprint.

The first major objection is the proposed project's treatment of the Los Angeles River corridor. Without substantial changes, the project is inconsistent with the County LA River Master Plan, City LA River Revitalization Master Plan, adopted City Bicycle Transportation Account compliance document, and draft City and County Bicycle Plans. The project would create an unnecessary gap in the City and County's vision for a 51-mile greenway along the river corridor and compromise this strategic vision for watershed sustainability.

The second major concern is the lack of meaningful open space preservation along the project's southern boundary. The project retains little to no natural topography or open space capable of supporting native wildlife. By allowing conflicting uses in proposed open space districts, even the minimal acreage offered fails to protect biological resources.

Mr. Jon Foreman

NBC Universal Evolution Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

SCH No. 2007071036

January 24, 2011

Page 2

As detailed below, the proposed project fails to meet goals and objectives of multiple applicable City and County plans. The applicant must revise the proposal to attain consistency with these plans. Doing so will likely change the nature of the proposed project significantly, potentially requiring a recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) to adequately analyze the impacts of the revised project, particularly in relation to the Los Angeles River. It is unfortunate that the applicant did not address these issues satisfactorily to avoid these circumstances.

Inappropriate Treatment of Los Angeles River Corridor

The current proposal turns its back on the river and precludes public access to this regional resource. While recognizing the design constraints due to the existing site layout, the applicant did not adequately consider implementation of the river greenway. The very language of the environmental document denigrates the efforts of the community groups, civic leaders, and public agencies that have invested in the river corridor. In deference to the revitalization efforts, the Los Angeles River should be referred to as just that, and not the "Los Angeles River Flood Control Channel" as used throughout the DEIR.

Along these same lines, although the proposed Trailhead Park is a genuinely good idea, its name connotes the idea that the Los Angeles River Greenway terminates there, rather than it being a node for local nonmotorized access to the river path. The proposed park does not magically replace the need for regional bicycle mobility, which can only be provided by a grade-separated, continuous bike path along the river, as envisioned in both the County's LA River Master Plan and the City's LA River Revitalization Master Plan. As proposed, Trailhead Park is just an amenity for Universal City residents with secondary value for greenway users.

Bicycle Access and Circulation Inadequately Detailed

The proposed internal network for bicycle circulation is too vague for the public to understand what is actually being proposed. The DEIR regularly confuses bike paths and lanes, with no defined standards for either. Given that the applicant proposes to replace a significant section of Class I grade-separated bike path with an undefined combination of Class II bike lanes and circuitous at-grade paths, these distinctions are essential for evaluating the project's merits. The Conservancy would not ordinarily be concerned with this level of detail, however since the applicant intends to substitute this internal network for a section of regionally planned greenway, the quality of this infrastructure becomes

Mr. Jon Foreman

NBC Universal Evolution Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

SCH No. 2007071036

January 24, 2011

Page 3

critical for the overall success of river revitalization. Phrases in the DEIR such as "improved crosswalks and landscaping buffers where feasible" do not demonstrate any underlying knowledge of or commitment to nonmotorized transportation. To ensure consistency with the draft City of LA Bicycle Plan, the proposed bicycle network must be reviewed and approved by the LA Department of Transportation Bicycle Program, preferably with staff time paid for by the applicant.

Even if the internal network provides adequate access to destinations within the project boundary, as proposed the bicycle path (or lanes) fails to even complete a connection to the river greenway on the west side of the project. Thus, the applicant's proposed replacement for the riverfront path is not even continuous on the western end. The detour would add approximately one mile to through bicycle and pedestrian trips, discouraging the use of these modes for utilitarian trips. Furthermore, the detour would add at least six crossings of high-traffic streets in less than two miles, each exposing vulnerable users to vehicular conflicts and increasing travel times for nonmotorized modes. Landscaping buffers and enhanced crosswalks do not reduce the frequency of turning conflicts. Any one of these effects could be considered a significant impact; the cumulative effect decreases the safety, efficiency, and continuity of nonmotorized travel called for by multiple City and County plans and eviscerates the vision of the two river master plans. The only feasible course of action is to implement the plans' clear intent to construct a continuous greenway along the length of the river corridor, which could include crossing the river.

NBC Universal Must Implement Relevant Portions of LARRMP

The Conservancy further asserts that implementation of the greenway should be a condition of approval for both the City and County's discretionary actions. There is ample nexus to require such a condition to ensure consistency with adopted plans. In particular, two discretionary actions are directly linked to greenway implementation.

First, the project's proposed continued lease of the County-owned River Road should only be permitted if this lease is compatible with the construction of a multi-use trail along this same river reach. The studios currently lease access rights along the County's access road for internal circulation of studio vehicles. The compatibility of this lease agreement with public river access must be evaluated. Renewing the lease without allowing public access would violate multiple adopted plans. Studio use of the County asset would only be consistent with the relevant plans if the public riverfront trail is constructed and maintained by the applicant.

Mr. Jon Foreman

NBC Universal Evolution Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

SCH No. 2007071036

January 24, 2011

Page 4

Second, the removal of the East-West Road from the County General Plan eliminates the most direct route for non-motorized travel from Forest Lawn Drive to Lankershim Boulevard. As previously mentioned, elimination of this direct route adds a mile to all nonmotorized trips, a significant deterrent to utilitarian travel. Understandably, the applicant is seeking to avoid the demolition of multiple studio buildings that would be required if the road were constructed. Fortunately, completion of the LA River Greenway through this corridor would retain the planned direct route for nonmotorized travel while only detouring motorized travel, for which a one-mile detour is less than significant. If the East-West Road were constructed as part of the proposed project, the applicant would be responsible for the entire cost of roadway construction. Therefore, amendment of the County General Plan to remove the East-West Road should only be approved with the condition that the LA River path be fully constructed by the applicant.

The Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan is a policy document adopted by the City Council. Proposed projects are required to be consistent with this document to not have significant land use impacts. As proposed, the project does not meet the plan's goals and objectives to increase public access to the river and activate properties along the riverfront. The plan addresses issues including building façades, lighting, views, shade, human scale, and wayfinding. The DEIR is deficient for not analyzing the compatibility of adjacent studios with these design features and proposing appropriate mitigation.

In addition, the Revitalization Master Plan proposes specific projects along the length of the river. Implementation of these river projects would mitigate the proposed project's impacts on the river corridor. The projects below are wholly located on land controlled by the City, County, or the applicant and immediately adjacent to the applicant's project area. The listed projects would add considerable value to the proposed project and could be seamlessly incorporated into planned improvements:

- Cahuenga to Headworks River Greenway (south side), Project #109
- Lankershim Boulevard Arterial Green Street, Project #106
- Lankershim Boulevard River Bridge, Project #107
- Lankershim Boulevard and Cahuenga Boulevard Enhanced Intersection, Project #108
- Weddington Park to Riverside Drive (by Forest Lawn) River Greenway (north side), Project #105

Mr. Jon Foreman

NBC Universal Evolution Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

SCH No. 2007071036

January 24, 2011

Page 5

The first project (#109) is essential for plan consistency and, as previously mentioned, must be incorporated as a mitigation measure. A preliminary engineering and feasibility study should be included with the Final EIR, with construction of the bikeway occurring during the first phase of residential development. The last project (#105) may be analyzed as an alternative to this project provided that it is continuous with planned path extensions to the east and west. This would likely entail two river crossings (east and west) to connect with path segments on the south side of the river. Projects must be designed to be compatible with eventual channel restoration.

The three projects along Lankershim Boulevard must be incorporated into traffic mitigation measures. Like other improvements along Lankershim Boulevard, proportional costs may be split with the Metro Universal project as appropriate. Incorporation of green street features on Lankershim Boulevard will be cost effective if designed and implemented in conjunction with other planned improvements.

All projects should be coordinated with the Bureau of Engineering's River Projects Office to ensure consistency with other planned and ongoing improvements in the corridor.

Project Threatens Wildlife Connectivity Through Cahuenga Pass

Aside from impacts to the Los Angeles River, the Conservancy is concerned with indirect impacts to wildlife connectivity through Cahuenga Pass. Currently, mobility through the pass is greatly limited by the Hollywood Freeway and parallel infrastructure. To the east, Griffith Park is a large enough habitat block to sustain populations of some mammals, including mule deer, coyotes, bobcats, and grey foxes. However, these populations are becoming genetically isolated as increasing traffic volumes all but preclude safe passage through Cahuenga Pass.

The proposed project would increase vehicular traffic on the Hollywood Freeway, with spillover traffic on Cahuenga Boulevard West and East. Increased traffic, particularly in the late night and early morning hours, will correspondingly increase wildlife mortality in this constrained passage. The DEIR is deficient for not addressing these impacts, despite the Conservancy's identification of the issue during scoping. The Final EIR must fully analyze these impacts and propose mitigation measures to improve successful wildlife movement over the Mulholland and Vine Street freeway bridges. Mitigation may include physical improvements to the crossings and/or acquisition of key bridge approach parcels by a public agency.

Inconsistent with Goals of Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan

The proposed project claims consistency with the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan while exempting itself from the requirements of the plan. Aside from this prima facie contradiction, the standards that would be established by the applicant's proposed specific plan districts would be far less protective of visual resources. These specific concerns are outlined in greater detail below.

The Conservancy maintains that the applicant's request for exemption from the Mulholland Specific Plan is unwarranted and sets a bad precedent for other large projects in the Mulholland Corridor. In no case should the standards of the new specific plan district be less restrictive than that of the Mulholland Specific Plan. The Mulholland Specific Plan was created in 1992 after considerable outreach to the affected communities. The applicant is attempting an end-run around the Mulholland Specific Plan's stricter requirements for grading, signage, lighting, and uses. The City should see this for what it is and disallow it.

Inadequate Preservation of Open Space on Site

The Conservancy's response to the Notice of Preparation included a proposed open space area to be protected by a conservation easement or fee ownership by a public agency. The Conservancy reasserts that this same area must be permanent natural open space to mitigate the intensity of the proposed project. At first glance, the applicant's Open Space Districts 1 and 2 appear to partially reflect the Conservancy's recommendation. However, the applicant's open space proposal is deficient in multiple respects. First, the sheer size of the project warrants much greater open space area than the 29 acres proposed. (Open Space District 3 is not natural in character and is therefore not be included in this amount.) Second, and more important, the standards for the open space areas are extraordinarily permissive. In particular, Open Space District 2 would allow for signage, cell phone towers, maintenance sheds, public service facilities up to 20,000 square feet, utility infrastructure, and exotic plants. All of these uses detract from the character and benefit of the proposed open space.

What these districts lack is any assurance that they will provide habitat for native wildlife and an enforceable mechanism for protecting and restoring native plant communities. These districts must be strengthened and expanded to protect on-site biological resources. Trails are not incompatible with these objectives, but any more intense use of these areas greatly reduces their utility as habitat. Adequately constrained conservation easements in

Mr. Jon Foreman

NBC Universal Evolution Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

SCH No. 2007071036

January 24, 2011

Page 7

favor of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority would accomplish these resource protection goals while still permitting appropriate passive recreational use by residents and the public.

Proposed Project Would Impact Significant Visual Resources

In addition to the visual impacts as seen from Mulholland Drive, the project would substantially alter a key scenic resources as seen from the Hollywood Freeway. The hill southwest of Hollywood Manor is a significant visual resource for travelers and the community that retains native plant communities and good vegetative cover. The proposed project would construct housing on the summit of this hill and require extensive slope stabilization below, completely altering the character of the resource. Given that the proposed uses for this area are ancillary to the project as a whole, no development should occur in this area between Buddy Holly Drive and Blair Drive. The high-rise alternative does in fact avoid residential development of this area, demonstrating the feasibility of this request without compromising other project goals. This area should instead be protected by the above mentioned conservation easement and restored with native vegetation.

Please continue to send all future documentation to the letterhead address. Should you have any questions, contact Paul Edelman of our staff at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128.

Sincerely,

ANTONIO GONZALEZ
Chairperson