

Agenda Item 11
SMMC
2/28/11



February 15, 2011

Mulholland Design Review Board
c/o Los Angeles City Planning Department
Mulholland Specific Plan Staff
6262 Van Nuys Boulevard, Suite 351
Van Nuys, CA 91401-2709

Re: Opposition to Proposed Realignment of the Mulholland Bridge

Dear Design Review Board:

I am writing on behalf of Bel Air Skycrest Property Owners' Association (BASPOA) to express our community's opposition to the proposed realignment of the Mulholland Bridge. We add our deep concerns to those expressed in the February 15th Brentwood Residents Coalition/Canyon Back Alliance letter, the contents of which we incorporate by reference as though set forth in full herein.

The residential community of Bel Air Skycrest lies on the south side of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway, one mile west of the Mulholland Bridge. The Mulholland Bridge is our community's connection to the world. It links us seamlessly to Mulholland Drive east of the bridge and also to the Sepulveda Pass/405 freeway. Most of us cross and recross it on a daily basis, going to and from work, school, shopping and errands. But this bridge is much more than just a useful piece of engineering that allows us to move from point A to point B. It is an integral part of a larger roadway – and not just any roadway but a world famous road winding its way across the top of the Santa Monica Mountains, “sprawled between stars and city lights for 55 miles from Griffith Park to the sea... a larger-than-life symbol of Los Angeles... [and a] spectacular... combination of rural and urban vistas.” (Ron Russell, *LA Times*, Dec 20, 1987)

A LITTLE HISTORY

In the late 1960s a bill was introduced in the California State Assembly to appropriate money for a freeway along Mulholland. This crisis alerted the city to

the need to somehow protect the road's unique and distinctly rustic character, which led to the 1971 designation of Mulholland as a scenic city parkway and to the appointment of a citizens' advisory committee which then spent some 20 years coming up with and refining the set of regulations now known as the *Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan*. In its way, this project brings us full circle, back to that 1960s idea of building a freeway along Mulholland. The realignment of the bridge, along with the widening of Skirball Center Drive to six lanes (possibly more), is at odds with almost all of the stated purposes of the Specific Plan, including:

- ◆ "maximum preservation and enhancement of the parkway's outstanding and unique scenic features and resources"
- ◆ preservation of Mulholland as a "slow-speed, low-intensity drive"
- ◆ ensuring "that land uses are compatible with the parkway environment"
- ◆ ensuring that "the design and placement of buildings and other improvements preserve, complement and/or enhance views from Mulholland Drive"
- ◆ preservation of "the existing residential character of areas along and adjoining the right-of-way"
- ◆ minimalization of grading and assurance "that graded slopes have a natural appearance compatible with the characteristics of the Santa Monica Mountains"
- ◆ preservation of "the existing ecological balance"
- ◆ protection of "prominent ridges, streams, and environmentally sensitive areas"
- ◆ and "a review process of all projects which are visible from Mulholland Drive to assure their conformance to the purposes and development standards contained in the Specific Plan..."

THE IMPACTS

Metro is trying to promote the idea that this proposal is not a radical departure from the EIR that was approved back in 2008. But nothing could be further from the truth. What is at issue here is, in fact, not just a realignment of the bridge but a radical reconfiguring of Mulholland Drive itself. The new bridge (Alternative 1) will plunge and angle in an entirely new way, breaking the old flow and severing Mulholland west of the 405 from the sinuous, continuous line of the beautiful and historic mother road. And then there will be the massive grading and concrete retaining walls; drainage (not even considered in the Environmental Addendum); medians (several are proposed, both for Mulholland itself and for Skirball Center Drive, even though they are not consistent with the Specific Plan's clear directive that "No median strip shall be constructed within the Mulholland Drive right-of-

way"); and the overlooks, which may sound like a good thing on first hearing, but which could well prove to be attractors for graffiti, vandalism and trash, and bring increased fire danger, gang activity and other security and maintenance problems to the area. (And by the way, where are people going to park while visiting the overlooks?)

There has been no study of the impacts on wildlife connectivity – deer, coyotes, and other animals that use the present bridge as a wildlife crossing (behavior which we witness on a fairly frequent basis). And what about the transitions? There has been no analysis of the impact the reconfiguration will have on traffic trying to enter and exit the freeway from the Skirball Center Drive/northbound 405 on and off ramps, the sharp turns (one of them, the onramp, practically a hairpin as it is), and the much shorter distance in which drivers will have to jockey for lane position. We are also concerned that the bridge itself, with its descent into an engineered "T" intersection at Skirball Center Drive, will create an increased safety risk for people and wildlife alike: at off-peak hours when traffic is able to move, the new bridge, with its more precipitous downward slope (interestingly not shown in the renderings), will make eastbound drivers more inclined to speed and could result in more accidents and road kill. None of this has been considered by way of environmental review, because back when the EIR was done, the bridge was going to be rebuilt in place, so it wasn't an issue.

The new design will present huge changes in terms of the parkway's visual character/aesthetic and its identity as, possibly, the world's most famous two-lane country road – but it will also bring many other impacts. And none of this has been fully disclosed, let alone properly analyzed. Very possibly it hasn't even been considered. One of the questions that needs to be answered is: How have the Metro and Caltrans people determined the impacts that they have analyzed and how exactly have they analyzed them?

Most importantly to our community, located as we are at the western end of the institutional corridor, we believe this configuration, while claiming the short term gain of alleviating traffic during construction, will actually, over the long term, attract more traffic, enabling (and even inviting) additional institutional growth on a large scale, increasing congestion, and transforming, once and for all, this low density residentially zoned stretch of Mulholland into a feeder street for the freeway and the institutions. This is totally antithetical to Mulholland's scenic parkway status. Please keep in mind that the institutions on the institutional corridor exist not "by right" but conditionally, and that they are supposed to conform to the Mulholland Scenic Parkway character and regulations and the area's residential zoning, not the other way around!

The balance between institutional development and residential zoning in this area is already tenuous. If the Mulholland Bridge Realignment goes forward, it

lays groundwork for changes and impacts that will degrade our neighborhood and our quality of life forever: this is a foreseeable impact, and the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires analysis of all foreseeable impacts. What's more, the whole concept of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway as an entity worthy (or capable) of protection will be seriously undermined.

REALIGNMENT & THE SPECIFIC PLAN

On page 16, Section 7, "Mulholland Drive and Right-of-Way Regulations", the Specific Plan addresses the issue of realignment directly: "Any change or improvement of the alignment or design of the paved portion of Mulholland Drive or the right-of-way, except for resurfacing and street and utility maintenance, shall conform...to its existing alignment from California State Highway Route 101 to the intersection of Topanga Canyon Boulevard, except as modified for safety reasons." There has been no evidence produced in the EIR or in the alternate design studies put forth by Metro that would indicate that there is a safety issue that would require a realignment of the bridge – the only trigger that allows for such an action. We believe this directive alone provides reason enough to reject the Mulholland Bridge Realignment outright.

And, in fact, on the subject of safety, consider what p. 17, Metro Design Alternatives Study, Section 3.06 "Constructability" has to say about the new Bridge Realignment plan:

"Using engineering judgment, the bridge [here they refer to the existing bridge, which would apparently be 'slightly' structurally compromised due to the requisite removal of a portion of existing abutment and bridge deck] would not be expected to collapse if Alternative 1 is chosen. There may be some cracks during construction, which would be acceptable as the remaining bridge would be for temporary use only. A more thorough investigation would be performed in the design phase."

This document is dated January 26, 2011, just a few weeks before the scheduled presentation to the Mulholland Design Review Board. Are they not in the design phase?!

So how did we get to this point?

SOME BACKGROUND ON THE CAC

The Community Advisory Committee (CAC) meetings for the 405/Sepulveda Pass Widening Project were frustrating from Day One. Representatives from the various neighborhood associations mistook the meetings (and perhaps the much

advertised "Design-Build" nature of the project contributed to this) as an opportunity for genuine public dialogue and so were disappointed when they discovered that no one was actually listening, at least not on the big issues, like moving the Skirball 405 southbound on and off ramps.

Throughout the process, the various transportation officials gave their monthly progress reports while withholding actual plans, renderings and salient details. Naturally there were complaints from the local citizenry about the inconveniences and delays caused by the construction process. And sometime between May and August 2010, someone in the CAC crowd suggested building a second bridge, temporary and parallel to the existing Mulholland Bridge, to allow uninterrupted use of one bridge while the other was under construction, thus avoiding all those pesky delays that were being experienced with the Sunset and Skirball bridges. At the September 2010 CAC meeting, the transportation officials announced, to enthusiastic applause, that they were indeed working on the design for a new bridge. Finally, the people felt, someone was listening. However, we have now learned that the new bridge will not be a merely temporary or parallel bridge. It will replace the scenic and historically aligned Mulholland Bridge, which will be demolished and lost forever. Further, to accommodate the new bridge, hundreds of linear feet of retaining walls and massive grading will further degrade our beautiful hillside environs.

THE CLAIMS

The claim that this relocation is going to help traffic in any significant way during construction is highly dubious, because the #1 cause of back-up on Mulholland is actually back-up on Skirball Bridge and Skirball Center Drive, and that's not going to change, regardless of which Mulholland Bridge alternative is pursued. For any of the alternatives, it will presumably change when (and only when) the new southbound off ramp configuration is completed and relieves traffic on the Skirball Bridge. The #2 problem is the lines of cars going in and out of the schools, which holds up traffic along Mulholland in the mornings, and this will not be affected by the proposed bridge realignment either.

Metro claims that the new plan would eliminate two weekends of complete freeway, ramp and bridge closure. But common sense tells us that the old bridge still has to come down, so there would still be at least one weekend of closure. And will they be able to get twice as much concrete demolished and cleared off the 405 in the same 54-hour time period?

Metro is also promising long-term benefits in that the new intersection resulting from the bridge realignment will supposedly improve the Mulholland/Skirball intersection from an "F" to a "C." But it is our understanding that: 1) the original plan of rebuilding the bridge in place would have had the same effect and 2)

there may, in fact, be some disagreement among the experts as to whether that "F" to "C" assessment is accurate.

In terms of the above claims, there doesn't seem to be much real advantage to this new proposal except to offer the public a placebo.

Furthermore, any short term gain of construction traffic alleviation, should it occur, seems likely to be more than offset by lane closures and delays on already problematic Skirball Center Drive caused by the planned (but again undisclosed and unanalyzed) widening of that roadway from its current 3-4 lanes to 6-7 lanes into the Skirball Center Drive hillside, with no renderings to show what it would look like.

The process is so flawed, the thinking so unclear, the documentation so full of inconsistencies that some renderings depict trees and plants plunked down in the middle of Mulholland Drive! But the most glaring inconsistency involves the distance of the new intersection from the existing intersection – in some documents the distance is described as Alternative 1 at 200 feet south of the existing intersection; in others it is described as Alternative 1 at 430 feet south.

The public was told that the realignment of the bridge would be parallel to the old bridge, virtually identical to it in all respects, and there would be no significant impacts. But Alternative 1 is not a "parallel" to the old bridge in any sense, or to the old bridge rebuilt-in-place. The original bridge is a scenic and historic resource, and the reconstruction-in-place honored it as such. Although unable to preserve the actual 1960 bridge, it was to be rebuilt according to exactly the same simple, streamlined design and in exactly the same position, so that neither the look nor the kinetic feel of driving on Mulholland – the sporty turn of the steering wheel, the uninterrupted sweep of the roadway under one's tires – would change at all. And it is certainly not parallel by any rules of geometry – because of the lay of the land, it has to take quite a different path. And none of this has been properly analyzed.

Some transportation officials have expressed disappointment that members of the public are now challenging their proposal after first seeming to welcome it. But when we welcomed it, we imagined it was going to be *exactly like the old bridge*. Accurate information has been hard to come by. But the more we learn, the more we realize how very different it will be. Whether intentionally or not, the Mulholland Bridge Realignment has been seriously misrepresented. The transportation officials' intentions may be good; their attempt to listen to and please the public may have been sincere. But something has gone very wrong.

So who will this new bridge actually benefit? According to the "Chronology of Public Comment" on page 2 of *The Mulholland Drive Bridge Relocation Fact*

Sheet, updates were provided to the Mulholland Educational Corridor Association (MECA) and "other stakeholders" from Oct 2010 to present, while information continued to be withheld from the CAC/general public until the December 2010 quarterly meeting, and right up to the present time the powers that be have continued to withhold from the general public the materials necessary to understand and evaluate what is actually being proposed.

Since the Mulholland Design Review Board appears to be the first reviewing agency to consider this discretionary project, we must insist that legally, you have a duty to look past the PR and vote to send it to the City Planning Department and Caltrans with a demand for full environmental review in accordance with CEQA, and to hold true to the imperatives in the Specific Plan. There is no question that there will be adverse impacts that have not been disclosed or reviewed, and the first step in the process is an Initial Study, followed by an EIR. When the EIR has been completed, you will have the full panoply of information from which to make an informed decision on the merits of the proposal.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lois Becker". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and address.

Lois Becker, President
Bel Air Skycrest Property Owners' Association
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Los Angeles, CA 90049

cc: State Senator Fran Pavley
State Assemblymember Mike Feuer
State Assemblymember Julia Brownley
County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
City Councilmember Bill Rosendahl
City Councilmember Paul Koretz
Los Angeles City Attorney Carmen Trutanich
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
Federation of Hillside & Canyon Associations
Brentwood Residents Coalition
Canyon Back Alliance
John Murdock, Esquire