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Mr. Adam Villani, Environmental Review Coordinator, EIR unit
City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning
200 North Spring Street, Room 750
Los Angeles, California 90012

Forest Lawn Memorial Park - Hollywood Hills Master Plan
Draft Environmental Impact Report (SCH No. 2008111048)

Dear Mr. Villani:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the proposed Forest Lawn Memorial Park - Hollywood Hills Master Plan. The cemetery's location adjacent to Griffith Park provides a serene natural setting apt for such a use. As discussed further below, the Conservancy believes the alternatives analysis provides a useful framework for evaluating the project and its effect on natural resources. A modest reduction in the size of the expansion, such as provided by Alternative 4, would preserve much of the site's most valuable natural resources while still permitting Forest Lawn to continue its operations over the next half century. With impact avoidance as an overarching objective, the Conservancy offers the following specific comments on the proposed project and DEIR:

On-site Riparian Habitat is a Unique Resource in Eastern Santa Monica Mountains

The on-site resources at Forest Lawn Memorial Park constitute some of the best riparian woodland habitat anywhere in the eastern Santa Monica Mountains. The Griffith Park-adjacent habitat is ecologically intact, high-functioning riparian habitat with nearly year-round surface flow. The subject property is situated on the cooler, wetter north-facing slopes of the Santa Monica Mountains, making it ecologically distinct from most of the remainder of the Griffith Park habitat block. Furthermore, Sennett Creek is not channelized for its entire length, all the way to its confluence with the Los Angeles River. No other Santa Monica Mountains creek is so directly ecologically connected to the Los Angeles River, making Sennett Creek and its tributaries high priorities for preservation.

As noted in the DEIR, riparian areas on the subject property serve dual functions. Their preservation is critical for both resident amphibian populations and mobile terrestrial mammals and reptiles that require access to lower reaches during the dry season. Sennett Creek is unique in the Griffith Park core habitat block in being able to consistently provide these ecosystem resources even in drought years. Therefore the quality of habitat connections between lower Sennett Creek and core upland habitat is one of the two most important considerations in assessing biological resource impacts of the proposed project.

Unique On-site Resources Necessitate Greater Impact Avoidance

As noted above, the Sennett Creek drainage, and to a lesser extent Drainage L (which is not a tributary of Sennett Creek), are unique resources within the Griffith Park core habitat block and critical to the capacity of the overall ecosystem. Given these considerations, impact avoidance must be the primary strategy in addressing impacts to biological resources. The Alternatives analysis provides a useful approach to evaluating reducing impacts through the avoidance of various drainages that are tributaries of Sennett Creek.

A slight reduction in project scale, such as represented by Alternative 4, would yield tremendous riparian benefits. The last five percent of the interment spaces is responsible for almost fifty percent of the riparian impacts. A small reduction in the context of the total expansion would produce substantial habitat preservation gains.

Lower Royce Canyon is the most important high-functioning riparian forest habitat in proximity to Griffith Park, with superior resource value than most similar habitats in the park. The Western Sycamore-Coast Live Oak woodland provides a lush, full canopy over Sennett Creek tributaries that would be impossible to replicate elsewhere. High-value habitats are more than the sum of their parts and can't be accounted for in terms of acres and number of trees. Mitigation is inappropriate when resource loss can be avoided.

Habitat Connection to Los Angeles River Important to Revitalization

The interface between Sennett Creek and the Los Angeles River is the only direct riparian connection between the river and upland natural habitat areas. Forest Lawn has undertaken an extensive restoration of areas of Sennett Creek within the Forest Lawn property. This restoration is exemplary and has helped to re-establish and enhance the natural connection from upland areas to the Los Angeles River. In the context of river revitalization, its importance cannot be overstated. While the proposed project does not

directly impact the Los Angeles River interface itself, it would make the upland habitat connections more tenuous by reducing the number of surface-running tributaries to Sennett Creek. The long term function of this habitat connection is directly dependent on the number of tributaries left intact. As noted in the DEIR, riparian corridors serve as primary wildlife movement corridors. Therefore Sennett Creek would function as the principal connection to future and existing habitat along a naturalized Los Angeles River.

While some degree of riparian impact is unavoidable given the nature of the project, a key objective must be to retain a connected, functional riparian ecosystem on-site. This is not just a function of the number of acres of jurisdictional impacts, but instead requires a coordinated approach to habitat preservation, creation, restoration, and enhancement that is integrated with the design of the proposed project. Ensuring the functionality of the on-site riparian ecosystem will avert cumulative impacts to Griffith Park resources dependent on habitat connectivity outside the park, particularly for more mobile animal species.

Habitat Connectivity Through Cahuenga Pass is a Critical Issue for Griffith Park Ecology

The DEIR asserts that Griffith Park is a biologically isolated island of remnant natural habitat:

> A review of current aerial photography and knowledge of this area generally suggests that this "island" of relatively natural habitat is, in itself, largely isolated. It has no connective habitat to natural areas west of the Hollywood Freeway. No discernable corridors or critical pathways for terrestrial wildlife have been identified.

The Conservancy disagrees with the notion that Griffith Park is disconnected from natural areas to the west. The Conservancy and Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) own both large habitat blocks and smaller connective parcels designed to facilitate wildlife movement throughout the eastern Santa Monica Mountains generally and across the Cahuenga Pass specifically. Where else could the occasional mountain lion sighted in Griffith Park come from?

Most assuredly, Cahuenga Pass is a partial barrier to some terrestrial wildlife movement–one that must be remedied. That issue is beyond the scope of this project but the project can provide mitigation opportunities as addressed in this letter. Studies of movement patterns through this corridor are ongoing to fill this information void; however

in the interim it must be assumed that biological exchange occurs regularly, even under existing constrained conditions. If anything, the tenuousness of the connection would warrant greater levels of mitigation rather than less. The remaining wildlife passages through Cahuenga Pass are the target of multiple public and private conservation efforts. The recent acquisition of Cahuenga Peak furthers these aims.

We request that Figure IV.C-3 be revised to more fully reflect all public protected open space in the project vicinity. Terrestrial wildlife movement does not require literally contiguous parcels of habitat, but instead habitat blocks of all sizes with some degree of permeability in between. The FEIR should revise this figure to reflect all public protected open space in the map view. Currently the figure does not even include contiguous habitat in the vicinity of Lake Hollywood. Conservancy staff will provide parkland GIS layers if requested.

Habitat Area to be Lost is Valuable and Should be Minimized

The DEIR calculates the habitat loss to occur under the proposed project as a percentage of the greater Griffith Park core habitat area to conclude that a 1.9 percent loss is less than significant. Setting aside the issue of significance, the Conservancy believes that habitat loss in the context of an already stressed ecosystem should be minimized. In the Hollywood Hills and Griffith Park ecosystems, the Conservancy's view is that the loss of more than five acres of any habitat type should be avoided.

Furthermore, the habitat loss associated with the proposed project would occur in vegetation communities that comprise the ecologically important north slope habitat in the Griffith Park core habitat block The FEIR should identify what percentage of riparian woodland and other sensitive communities in the Griffith Park core habitat area would be impacted under the proposed project and each alternative.

Second only to connectivity, the size of the core habitat area is an important issue facing the Griffith Park habitat block. As the 2007 fire demonstrated, a single stochastic disturbance can affect the entire area. Habitat size is the primary determinant of an ecosystem's resiliency against this kind of event. Unaffected areas provide critical source flora and fauna for recolonization after natural or manmade disturbances.

As proposed, riparian mitigation may occur outside the Santa Monica Mountains in the upper Los Angeles River watershed. Thus this off-site mitigation may not address the

reduction in habitat area within the Griffith Park core habitat area. We believe that the mitigation should be focused on this core habitat area. To compensate for the diminution of the Griffith Park core habitat area, additional mitigation should occur within or in close proximity to the habitat block. For example, this mitigation could include permanent preservation of private land within the Griffith Park core habitat area or Cahuenga Pass wildlife corridor. The FEIR must include a voluntary mitigation measure to provide a fund for the MRCA to acquire approximately 20 acres in either the movement corridor or unprotected riparian woodland habitat within the block. A rough estimate for the value of such a fund can be computed using the cost of the recent Cahuenga Peak acquisition, which was $87,000 per acre.

To offset the aforementioned habitat loss, the voluntary mitigation measure must contribute $2 million to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) for acquisition of parcels within the Griffith Park core habitat area and/or Cahuenga Pass wildlife movement corridor and related expenses. Expenditures from this fund would be geographically limited to within the Santa Monica Mountains east of a north-south axis formed by Runyon Canyon Park, Mulholland Drive, and Multiview Drive. This amount is commensurate to the impact from Alternative 4, the Conservancy's preferred alternative. Any increase in project size beyond the 133 acres of Alternative 4 shall be further offset by additional habitat acquisition funding at a rate of $80,000 per acre. Should the project be reduced in size below that contemplated by Alternative 4, a proportional reduction in off-site acquisition funding may be appropriate. The voluntary mitigation measure must require that an initial $600,000 be paid to the MRCA prior to issuance of the grading permit, with the balance of the fund transferred within 18 months of that date.

Key parcels in the corridor are owned by the Department of Water and Power (DWP). Causing for the permanent preservation of these parcels by the applicant would contribute toward offsetting the habitat loss associated with the proposed project and therefore constitutes an adequate alternative to transferring the balance of the fund. However, the initial $600,000 payment is intended for acquisitions on the west side of the Cahuenga Pass and must be transferred regardless of the status of the DWP property. If desired by the applicant, the MRCA would allow the applicant to secure MRCA-approved properties on the Authority's behalf in lieu of the full monetary contribution. If the majority of the DWP property between Lake Hollywood and Cahuenga Pass is not adequately protected to MRCA standards within 18 months of the issuance of the grading permit associated with the subject project, the remaining $1.4 million shall be transferred to the MRCA.

On-Site Resources Must be Better Protected

The Conservancy asserts that minimizing on-site impacts to sensitive communities is the correct approach. Remaining resources on-site must be afforded the highest possible form of protection. Preservation of remaining habitat, revegetated slopes, and riparian corridors on the subject property must be a condition of approval to ensure enforceable protection in perpetuity. In addition, the adjacent undeveloped property owned by Forest Lawn to the west of the project area must be permanently protected as part of the subject approval. The Conservancy understands that the DWP easement is preexisting and would be superior to any preservation program. The Conservancy would support any fee simple transfer of conserved land to the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks with an overlying conservation easement in favor of the MRCA.

Fencing Must be Permeable to Mammals

The DEIR notes that existing fencing on the property's perimeter is somewhat permeable to wildlife. However, the fencing's permeability is currently left to chance and the project contains no assurances that future extensions or repairs will also be permeable to wildlife. To achieve a less than significant impact to wildlife movement, a voluntary mitigation measure should explicitly state that all new or renovated fencing greater than 1,500 feet from Forest Lawn Drive will be passable to wildlife such that mammals can access the lower reaches of Sennett Creek during the dry months.

Lighting Impacts are Adequately Addressed

The potential impact from both direct and ambient lighting is an important consideration for biological resources. The Conservancy believes that the standard of preventing artificial illumination of natural areas, as identified in the DEIR, is sufficient. Sennett Creek and its tributaries must be included in the definition of natural areas for this purpose.

Impact of Brush Clearance Should be Identified

The DEIR references the fact that some natural areas will be brushed and asserts that this impact will be less than significant. However, the location and extent of brush clearance is not clearly identified therefore the impact cannot be effectively evaluated. The FEIR should define what brush clearing for aesthetic purposes means and show the extent of its reach into natural areas. Additionally, the FEIR should disclose whether any of the brush

clearance will occur on neighboring parcels or in Griffith Park. Brush clearance areas must be evaluated by quantifying the impact by affected habitat type.

Cumulative Impacts Should be Further Examined

The DEIR asserts that because the project's impacts are mitigated to a level of insignificance and any other potential project would likewise be mitigated to a level of insignificance, there would be no potential for cumulative impacts. However, the distinction between a cumulative impact and a direct impact is that a cumulative impact occurs when multiple direct impacts that would otherwise be less than significant are in fact significant when considered together. A project with reduced impacts due to off-site mitigation, as is the case with the proposed project, could very well contribute to cumulative impacts in the vicinity of the project despite that mitigation.

The FEIR should further evaluate the cumulative impacts of the proposed project in the context of an ever-shrinking core habitat area and ever-diminishing connectivity to the rest of the Santa Monica Mountains. It is very possible that additional mitigation may be required to address specific potential cumulative impacts to wildlife movement, habitat area, and ecosystem resilience. The habitat acquisition fund proposed above would address this potential for cumulative impacts.

Alternative 4 Represents Best Balance of Resource Protection and Cemetery Use

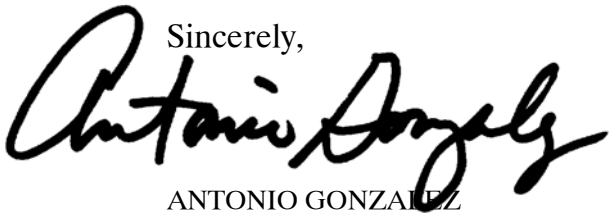
The Conservancy supports the identified environmentally superior alternative: Alternative 4. This alternative strikes the best balance between expanding the cemetery and preserving the highest-value riparian resources. As outlined above, the on-site riparian resources are critical to the overall health of the Griffith Park core habitat area, warranting a sharp focus on impact avoidance. Alternative 4 successfully preserves multiple Sennett Creek tributaries and their associated riparian woodland habitat without unduly reducing the number of interment sites possible on the subject property. The alternative provides for 188,487 interment sites, instead of the proposed 199,614, while impacting 3.79 fewer acres of jurisdictional streambed than the proposed project. Only Alternative 5 would avoid further riparian impacts, but at the cost of a substantial reduction in interment sites.

Although Alternative 4 still results in some riparian resource loss, the extent of this loss is much reduced in comparison to the proposed project and would spare the most sensitive on-site resources. The MRCA has entered into an In-Lieu Fee Agreement with Forest Lawn

in accordance with mitigation measure C-8 providing for the replacement of lost riparian resources through creation, restoration, and enhancement activities off-site, pending approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and California Department of Fish and Game. Mitigation will be determined based on a required mitigation ratio and what jurisdictional acreage is ultimately impacted by the proposed project.

The State Clearinghouse failed to notify the Conservancy of the release of this DEIR, though we understand that the City and Forest Lawn did in fact correctly request that the State Clearinghouse notify the Conservancy. In order to avoid lack of notice in the future with regard to this project, please send all future notices and other project documents to the letterhead address. If you have any questions, please contact Paul Edelman of our staff at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128.

Sincerely,



ANTONIO GONZALEZ
Chairperson