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September 27, 2007

Bruce W. McClendon, FAICP
Department of Regional Planning
General Plan Development Section
County of Los Angeles
320 West Temple Street, Room 1390
Los Angeles, California 90012

Comments on the Los Angeles County General Plan Update

Dear Mr. McClendon:

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority (WCCA) provides the following comments on the Los Angeles County Draft Preliminary General Plan, proposed Significant Ecological Area (SEA) Ordinance, and the proposed Hillside Management (HMA) Ordinance. WCCA was created for the proper planning, conservation, environmental protection and maintenance of the habitat and wildlife corridor between the Whittier-Puente-Chino Hills and the Cleveland National Forest in the Santa Ana Mountains. WCCA has been following this General Plan development process closely and has provided comments on the General Plan Update in letters dated December 20, 2002 and July 7, 2004, and on the proposed SEAs in letters dated April 30, 2001 and May 2, 2001. We have attached those letters, and they are incorporated into this letter. (Throughout this letter, underlined means to add, ~~strike-out~~ means to delete, and an ellipsis means the text should remain unchanged.)

Puente Hills Significant Ecological Area Boundaries

As stated in WCCA's previous letters, WCCA commends the County and its consultants on the excellent work done for the update of the SEAs. Specifically, WCCA compliments the County's efforts to propose more inclusive and biologically sound boundaries to ensure sustainability of the SEAs. This is evident in the proposed Puente Hills SEA.

While the scale of the mapping of Figure 5.3 is not sufficient to do a complete review the Puente Hills SEA boundary, we do recommend three important changes. First, we recommend that an area east of Harbor Boulevard, at the southern boundary of the County to be included in the Puente Hills SEA. We made this recommendation in our April 30, 2001 letter to the County, and we identified it as Area 6, and it is shown on the attached color map. This area is a buffer for a canyon which forms a critical wildlife link south of Shea Homes across Harbor

Boulevard. This area appears to support the federally threatened species, coastal California gnatcatcher, and this area is functionally integral to the remainder of the proposed Puente Hills SEA. The SEA map for the Rowland Heights Community Plan should be updated to reflect inclusion of this Area 6.

Also, WCCA requests that the County consider connecting and making wider the area identified as "A" on the attached color map. It appears that the width of the proposed SEA has been made smaller in this area and in fact now the western and eastern portion appear to be disconnected, compared to the SEA boundary in the 2000 SEA report (PCR Services Corporation et al. 2000a). Extensive amounts of money have been spent to preserve nearly 4,000 acres in the western portion of the wildlife corridor. We recommend that the County staff reevaluate this area with a careful review of the 2000 SEA report, existing aeriels, and existing plant communities to consider a wider SEA here in recognition of the regional connectivity of the western portion of the wildlife corridor to the remainder of the wildlife corridor to the east.

WCCA concurs with the inclusion of an area identified as Area 5 in WCCA's April 30, 2001 letter and this area is shown on the attached color map. This area forms the entrance to a small canyon which is a critical wildlife link and the area is core habitat of the western Puente Hills. The SEA map for the Rowland Heights Community Plan should be updated to reflect inclusion of this Area 5.

Our third recommendation is the inclusion of all land within the Puente Hills Landfill site that lies to the east and north of the areas designated for landfill operations in the current Conditional Use Permit. This would include land adjacent to Hacienda Heights and the Pomona Freeway. Good native habitat is present in this area and inclusion of this area would help link San Jose Creek and Whittier Narrows to the rest of the Whittier-Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor. The landfill will be closed in the future, and the final closure plan will determine the final use and habitat value of the landfill. This extension of the Puente Hills SEA would include those portions of Area 1, as identified in our April 30, 2001 letter, but exclude those areas designated for landfill operations in the current Conditional Use Permit. See also attached color map.

WCCA recommends that the County provide larger maps of the individual SEAs, that are overlain on relevant layers (e.g., topography) for reference, to facilitate the review by the public in future public review documents.

Management of Significant Ecological Areas

In a previous letter (May 2, 2001), WCCA supported the management practices recommended in the 2000 SEA studies (PCR Services 2000a, 2000b). WCCA continues to support those recommendations. WCCA recommends that these management

practices be more explicitly incorporated into the General Plan and the SEA Ordinance. Specifically, the Background Report recommends that development of properties within SEAs should disturb no more than 20 percent of the SEA. It would be appropriate for the County to incorporate this into the SEA Ordinance and to establish a simple monitoring system that is checked periodically (e.g., every 5 years) to ensure consistency with this requirement.

Significant Ecological Areas Development Review

Under the Draft Preliminary General Plan, projects in an SEA, unless exempt, will be subject to one of two regulatory processes: 1) Minor Conditional Use Permit (CUP) without Significant Ecological Area Technical Advisory Committee (SEATAC) review (Minor SEA-CUP), or Conditional Use Permit for SEA (SEA-CUP) with SEATAC review.

As stated in our July 7, 2004 letter, WCCA continues to be concerned about certain exemptions from SEATAC review for projects within SEAs. These include single-family homes, accessory structures to a primary use, and grazing. There are countless scenarios in which these proposed exempt activities could result in significant, adverse environmental impacts. These types of activities can be particularly problematic if the development and vegetation removal occur in sensitive habitat areas near water sources used by wildlife (such as mammals), or near a habitat linkage chokepoint. Extensive grazing over a large area, can result in significant degradation to native plant communities and sensitive species. If the County chooses to retain single-family homes as an exemption, then this exemption should be amended to state:

Individual single-family residences that will result in less than 5,000 square feet of surface area grading, where only one residence is proposed to be built on a legal lot or parcel of land, including project-related grading permits.

These procedures also state that for project(s) on parcels located partially within an SEA, but with the development area outside of the SEA, the activity is exempt. Such a sweeping provision would not work with lots 2-acres or larger because both non-structural and future development can result in significant, ecological adverse impacts. For this reason, the proposed single family exemption from a CUP leaves a significant gap in protection. Any acreage above and beyond 2-acres should either be permanently protected with an irrevocable deed restriction or a conservation easement to a public park agency. Such deed restriction or conservation easement must prohibit all future development, including agriculture, non-native plants, equestrian facilities, non-fire department required brush clearance, and golf courses.

If the County chooses to retain grazing of horses or other animals as an exemption, then this exemption should be amended to state:

Grazing of horses or other animals and the construction of corrals as an accessory use, provided that the grazing and corrals occupy less than ½ acre, as allowed by the land use designation, zoning, and other applicable county regulations including, but not limited to, Chapters 12.36, 12.32, and 17.04 of the county code.

For activities that may not require a building or grading permit, but that have the potential to significantly impact SEAs, the County should develop procedures that specify a clear requirement for SEATAC review (e.g., for vegetation removal ½ acre or greater).

Furthermore, the SEA Regulatory Review Procedures for CUPs (including SEATAC review) should provide the highest level of protection because realistically, large scale subdivision projects could potentially result in the greatest impacts to the SEAs. The following statement in the Draft Preliminary General Plan (p. 120) should be amended to state:

"Recommendations ~~may~~ will include the clustering of structures away from sensitive areas, and then dedicating that area as natural open space to a public park or conservation agency. Other recommendations may include limiting lighting, protecting habitat linkages and movement corridors, using open-wildlife-permeable fencing, and maintaining a short distance between existing infrastructure and new development to limit grading of natural vegetation."

Biological Resources

Consistent with WCCA's comments in previous letter (July 7, 2004), we make the following comments. It is critical to amend the following policy to the Conservation/Open Space Element Policy (C/OS) 5.1 in order to secure adequate protection of SEAs, given the potential for significant adverse environmental impacts from development in SEAs.

Maintain and monitor the program and network of Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs). Proposed developments in SEAs shall include mitigation for unavoidable impacts to SEAs from the removal, conversion, or modification of natural habitat for new development, including required fuel modification and brush clearance. Mitigation measures include permanent preservation of existing habitats, habitat restoration, and habitat enhancement. Mitigation areas shall be protected in perpetuity by fee simple dedications and/or conservation easements.

WCCA supports Item 6 of Section F. Burden of Proof in the SEA Ordinance, which states: "Roads and utilities are located and designed to prevent damage to biotic resources or wildlife movement..." Similarly, the following policy should be added after Policy C/OS 5.1 to promote, monitor and ensure efforts to protect wildlife corridors. This should also be added to the Circulation Element under Goal C-3 pertaining to an environmentally sensitive circulation system.

Site roads to avoid significant adverse impacts to wildlife movement. Mitigate adverse impacts to wildlife (such as road kill) during continued operation of existing roadways and construction of new and expanded roadways.

Policy C/OS 5.3 addresses maintaining the integrity of the County's diverse plant communities. Coastal sage, a sensitive plant community, should be considered in this policy, in addition of those already listed. Coastal sage scrub is recognized as very threatened in southern California by the California Department of Fish and Game.¹ It has been estimated that about 70-90 percent of the pre-settlement coastal sage scrub in Southern California has been destroyed primarily by residential development (Noss et al. 1995). Coastal sage scrub also supports a suite of sensitive wildlife and plant species. The County should revise the statement C/OS 5.3 as follows: "Maximize the ecological function of the County's diverse natural habitats, such as Joshua Trees, native Oak woodlands, coastal sage scrub, walnut woodlands, and perennial grasslands."

Protection and Dedication of Natural Open Space

WCCA supports several of the goals and policies of the Conservation & Open Space Element including, but not limited to, Policy C/OS 1.1, "Promote the acquisition and preservation of open space areas throughout the County" and Policy C/OS 1.2, "Create an established network of open space areas that provide regional connectivity...from the southwestern extent of the Mojave Desert to the Puente-Chino Hills."

Of note, when land is set-aside to be protected as permanent natural open space as part of the development review process, it is vitally important that legal mechanisms be put in place to avoid any confusion in the future regarding whether that land was intended to be protected in perpetuity. Equally important, the land that is to be protected as natural open space should be put under the ownership of a park or conservation agency, with the experience and mission to adequately protect that open space. To this end, ownership by a homeowners' association (HOA) is not adequate permanent protection for natural open space (e.g., endangered or rare species habitat, sensitive native plant communities, etc.).

¹ See sensitivity rankings "Sensitivity of Top Priority Rare Natural Communities in Southern California," determined by the California Department of Fish and Game.

HOAs sometimes have missions and goals that are conflicting with the primary purpose of protecting the natural land. Ownership and/or management by HOAs of landscaped or modified areas is appropriate.

WCCA concurs with the intent of the language regarding proposed dedicated open space in several places in the Draft Preliminary General Plan and the Proposed SEA Ordinance. WCCA recommends the following changes to Section J. Conditions 2. Open space:

...Natural [o]pen space, where proposed or required, shall be permanently dedicated in fee to a public park or conservation agency, ~~held under common ownership~~, or other means acceptable to the regional planning commission or planning director, which extinguishes future development rights and to the maximum extent feasible, is contiguous [with] natural open space[.]

Similarly, in the Hillside Management Ordinance, WCCA recommends the following changes to Section M. Required Conditions:

1. Open Space. Open space shall be permanently dedicated and comprised of at least 25 percent of the net area of a development in an urban land use category, and at least 70 percent of the net area of a development in a rural land use category. Open space shall be contiguous natural open space, and shall be permanently dedicated in fee to a public park or conservancy agency ~~or held under common ownership~~...

Hillside Management Ordinance and Scenic Resources

WCCA concurs with several policies and guidelines in the Scenic Resources section of the Draft Preliminary General Plan, such as #1 in Figure 5.6: Design Guidelines for a Model Project in Hillside Management Areas, which state: "Minimize grading and removal of natural vegetation."

WCCA recommends that the following statement to be amended to # 9, as follows in Figure 5.6: "Preserve ~~significant~~ sensitive trees and habitats, natural watercourses, wildlife corridors and distinctive natural features."


Los Angeles' landscape is filled with hillside, scenic resources. It is essential to recognize the need to preserve important significant viewsheds found within the County. WCCA strongly recommends that the grading percentage qualification be reduced from 25 percent to 15 percent under the Hillside Management Ordinance and the Hillside Management CUP. The natural topography and biological resources enable the residents of Los Angeles County to enjoy all the scenic resources, including the hillsides.

Trail Network

There are several existing and proposed trails within the Puente-Chino Hills shown on the fold-out map entitled: Los Angeles County Riding and Hiking Trails (prepared by Department of Parks and Recreation 2001) in the Puente-Chino Hills area, that are not shown on Figure 5.2, Trail Network of the Draft Preliminary General Plan. These include Schabarum Extension Connector Trail (15), Rowland Heights Connector Trail (17), Rowland Heights Loop Trail (18), and portions of Schabarum Extension Trail (14), west of Fullerton Road. If these are not to be included, we respectfully request a justification for why each is proposed to be excluded. Otherwise, these should be included in the General Plan. As the Draft Preliminary General Plan states (p. 115): "Future development of trails will be easier to complete in areas with ample open space and parkland, such as...Puente Hills..."

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact Judi Tamasi of our staff at (310) 589-3200, ext. 121 or at judi.tamasi@mrca.ca.gov.

Sincerely,



Bob Henderson
Chairperson

Literature Cited

Noss, R. F., E.T. LaRoe III, and J.M. Scott. 1995. Endangered Ecosystems of the United States: A Preliminary Assessment of Loss and Degradation. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Biological Service, Biological Report 28. February.

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