

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: July 25, 2011


From : Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 16: Consideration of resolution authorizing grant of Proposition 84 funds to Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for acquisition and improvements at Elephant Hill, El Sereno, City of Los Angeles.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing grant of Proposition 84 funds to Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) in an amount not to exceed \$636,500 for acquisition and improvements at Elephant Hill in the El Sereno area of Los Angeles.

Legislative Authority: Sections 33204(c), 33204.2, and 33204.27 of the Public Resources Code.

Background: Elephant Hill is a long-embattled island of relict habitat in the northeast Los Angeles hills. Proposed for residential development multiple times over the years, the City acquired 20 acres in 2009 as part of a legal settlement with a would-be developer. The MRCA has submitted the attached grant application to acquire and improve a portion of this City holding. MRCA acquisition of five of the 20 acres would defray the City's expense and prepare the site for public access. The funding source used by the City to pay for the settlement prohibits public access, therefore MRCA ownership is required before park improvements can be constructed.

Community support for preservation of Elephant Hill is strong. A coalition of over 60 community leaders representing diverse organizations was instrumental in blocking the last attempt to develop the site. This group hopes to see the area preserved as open space and opened to the public as soon as possible.

Concurrent with this grant application to the Conservancy, the MRCA is also applying for funding from the Urban Greening for Sustainable Communities Program for park development. MRCA acquisition of the 5-acre site is a necessary prerequisite to applying for this funding source. This Conservancy grant application is for acquisition and the minimal improvements necessary to open the site for public access. With the Urban Greening grant, a more robust park could be developed at the site including trails, interpretive elements, native plant restoration, and drainage improvements.

Sixteen parcels totaling five acres were appraised by the City at \$495,000. An additional two parcels on Pullman Street may be acquired if funding for drainage improvements is awarded, subject to the City's agreement. This grant application includes up to \$50,000 for minimal park improvements necessary to provide public access. This would also constitute a local match for the State grant funding source. Due to these variables, the MRCA grant application to the Conservancy is for an amount not to exceed \$636,500.

The ultimate scope of the project at Elephant Hill will be determined by the total amount of funding available for construction. For more information on the proposed restoration and improvements, please see the attached Elephant Hill Open Space concept proposal.

Analysis: The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84), allocated funds to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy in Chapter 7, 75050(g)(2) of the Public Resources Code for the protection and restoration of rivers, lakes and streams, their watersheds and associated land, water, and other natural resources in the upper Los Angeles River watershed.

The Elephant Hills Open Space acquisition and improvements project is within the upper Los Angeles River watershed, and is consistent with Proposition 84's policy to promote access and enjoyment of land and water resources. All of the activities planned under this grant can be considered development, preservation, protection, or restoration for purposes of Proposition 84 because they physically improve the lands being used for the park. The project consists of protection of natural open space through acquisition, restoration to improve the site's natural habitat function, and visitor-serving amenities that educate and communicate the significance and value of natural and cultural resources.

All elements of the project fit within the definitions of eligible activities (development, interpretation, preservation, protection, restoration). Planned improvements include trails, gates, interpretation, drainage, and habitat restoration. The definition of restoration specifically includes planning as an eligible activity.

This project is for the development of a capital asset, that is, a land and water resource in the upper Los Angeles River watershed. As such, it is a proper expenditure of bond funds. The activities that this grant will fund will acquire and construct a new public facility, which qualifies as a capital asset for purposes of the General Obligation Bond Law.