

**SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY**

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Ha Ly, AICP  
Associate Planner  
City of Malibu  
23825 Stuart Ranch Road  
Malibu, California 90265

**Rancho Malibu Hotel Project Draft Environmental Impact Report Comments  
Coastal Development Permit No. 11-028  
Winter Canyon Watershed**

Dear Ms. Ly:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) offers the following comments and recommendations on the above referenced Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Rancho Malibu Hotel Project. The Conservancy commented on previous versions of the hotel project in letters dated June 19, 1995; August 19, 1996; October 6, 1997; and May 21, 2012. The Conservancy currently owns the approximately 84-acre Malibu Bluffs Property located adjacent to the south and west of the City's Malibu Bluffs Park.

The Conservancy supports visitor-serving uses, including overnight accommodations, in the Santa Monica Mountains zone. Such uses should complement the landscape and minimize loss of habitat and viewshed resources. The Reduced Development/Garden Hotel Alternative, herein referred to as the Alternative Project, better achieves these objectives than the currently proposed development by avoiding both direct and indirect loss of coastal sage scrub in the DEIR-identified wildlife corridor.

The project proposes to construct a 274,775 square-foot (sf) 146-room hotel complex consisting of a main hotel building, 19 two-story secondary hotel buildings, two single-story

secondary hotel buildings, spa complex, fitness center, retail, restaurant, bar, ballroom, meeting rooms, swimming pool, and other facilities. A total of 543 parking spaces in a 166,827 sf parking structure and a ground level employee parking lot of 40 spaces would be provided. An advanced onsite wastewater treatment system (OWTS) facility would be located beneath the proposed employee parking lot in the northwest portion of the site. The Project Alternative would reduce development to 231,000 sf, and would consist of two main hotel buildings and 12 detached one- and two-story buildings to accommodate 146 hotel rooms. A total of 500 parking spaces would be provided, along with a spa, banquet rooms, and other supporting facilities. There would be an overall 22 percent increase in natural hillside open space from 11 to 14 acres with this alternative.

### **Need for A Conservation Easement**

We commend the findings of the DEIR that the subject site represents one of two remaining habitat linkages between the main body of the Santa Monica Mountains and Malibu Bluffs. The other connection is via Puerco Canyon to the west.

The proposed development would occupy 16.5 acres (approximately 59 percent) of the 27.8-acre site. Required fuel modification would consume 8-10 more acres with permanent habitat degradation. More than a third of the coastal sage scrub assemblage in the wildlife corridor would be lost as a result of this development, and the vast majority of the remainder will be in different types of fuel modification zones. As concluded by the DEIR on page 37 of section 3.4, the proposed project would effectively isolate Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area south of Pacific Coast Highway (Malibu Bluffs Habitat Complex) from a broad range of animal species. Fuel modification would leave behind only a narrow strip of unaltered land. To address the deficiency, the Conservancy recommends that the Fuel Modification Plan require only native vegetation in all fuel modification zones to maximize the per-acre habitat value of the remaining corridor area.

The Alternative Project would both widen the wildlife corridor and allow more land to be free from varying impacts of fuel modification. A long-term mitigation measure in the form of a conservation easement or deed restriction is critical to effectively protect such a broader wildlife corridor and remaining open space in the Alternative Project.

The conservation easement or permanent deed restriction must prohibit all development and other uses, including fencing, grading, lighting, accessory structures, equestrian facilities, signage, non-native plants, and vineyards. The proposed storm drain in the southeastern portion of the site would be allowed in the conservation easement, provided

that slight design changes are made if necessary, to allow wildlife to cross over it. The easement would also allow Fire Department-required fuel modification (with native plants only), irrigation, trails (constructed and managed by the accepting agency), and habitat restoration. Only native plants would be allowed to be planted in the conservation easement area. The accepting agency would also have the right to remove non-native plants.

The Conservancy concurs with the DEIR findings on page 36 of section 3.4,

“Although the Project Applicant made a good faith effort to mitigate Project-specific impacts to habitats through purchase of the Francisco Property, this effort did not directly mitigate impacts associated with disruption of the wildlife corridor between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Malibu Bluffs Park.”

The Standard Condition of Approval to mitigate impacts to the wildlife corridor claims that the “Applicant shall record an offer to dedicate an easement include deed restrictions that surrender any development rights.” The vague and potentially misleading statement is in need of further clarification. The Conservancy highly recommends incorporating the voluntarily offered conservation easement proposed in this letter as the Condition of Approval for this mitigation measure.

### **Reduced Development/Garden Hotel Alternative**

The Reduced Development/Garden Hotel Alternative is imperative for a functional wildlife corridor. The Conservancy appreciates that this alternative addresses some previous concerns raised by the Conservancy. The Alternative Project allows for more open space by consolidating and concentrating buildings toward the center of the site, away from coastal sage scrub habitat in the perimeter slopes of the property.

The Alternative Project proposes pathways to connect to the proposed Malibu Creek Trail and Malibu Pacific Trail on the property, but does not reserve adequate space for future development of these trails. The conservation easement proposed by the Conservancy would allow for development of the Malibu Pacific Trail, located along the northeasterly property boundary. However, an additional easement should be offered to allow for future development of the Malibu Creek Trail, located along the westerly property boundary.

We appreciate your consideration of these comments. If you have any questions, please

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contact Paul Edelman, Deputy Director for Natural Resources and Planning, by phone at (310) 589-3200, ext. 128, or by email at [edelman@smmc.ca.gov](mailto:edelman@smmc.ca.gov).

Sincerely,

IRMA MUÑOZ  
Chairperson