

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: February 24, 2014

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

Subject: **Agenda Item 11: Consideration of resolution authorizing a grant to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for project planning and design related to the development of a Caltrans Project Study Report and subsequent environmental review for wildlife crossing structures at the 101 freeway at Liberty Canyon, incorporated and unincorporated Agoura Hills area.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution approving a grant of Proposition 40 funds to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for project planning and design and subsequent environmental review for wildlife crossing structures at the 101 freeway at Liberty Canyon.

Legislative Authority: Public Resources Code Sections 33204.2(a) and 33204.27(a)

Background: There is broad, longstanding consensus in the scientific community that Liberty Canyon provides the best habitat linkage potential across the 101 freeway between the Simi Hills and the Santa Monica Mountains. The ultimate long term efficacy of this inter-mountain range habitat linkage will depend on the location and characteristics of a new dedicated wildlife crossing structure. Recent mountain lion road kills both on the 101 freeway at Liberty Canyon and on arterial roads within the Santa Monica Mountains have spurred increased urgency to initiate the formal process with Caltrans for the development of plans for a maximally effective crossing structure.

The genetic integrity and population stability of the wildlife in both the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills is of regional significance. To assure the ecological richness of the hundreds of millions of dollars worth of public open space for centuries, the highest function freeway crossing structure is warranted.

A recent multi-agency meeting convened by Senator Fran Pavley focused the key government agencies--including Caltrans--on this task. The bulk of the land use issues fall within the boundaries of the City of Agoura Hills whose City Manager attended the meeting. The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) owns the two key parcels on either side of 101 Freeway at Liberty Canyon in the optimal places both for a wildlife tunnel or overpass. At this meeting, a consensus was reached that, if feasible, a dedicated wildlife

overpass would be the superior freeway crossing structure to serve all species. This is a departure from three prior years of agency efforts to work with Caltrans and potential funding sources on a 310-foot-long and 13-foot-wide underpass.

The mandatory step for forward movement on the planning and design of a new Liberty Canyon wildlife crossing structure is to facilitate Caltrans' preparation of a Project Study Report (PSR). A PSR forms the baseline that allows Caltrans to move forward with environmental clearance and engineering. Each of these steps will move the project closer to being poised for some combination of public and private funding. The PSR will probably take one year to complete. A PSR looks at alternatives. Most likely Caltrans will want to study at least one tunnel and one overpass option.

The MRCA has submitted the attached grant application to fund its efforts to contract with Caltrans and other contractors to produce a PSR for a dedicated Liberty Canyon freeway wildlife crossing structure. The requested amount of \$200,000 of Proposition 40 funding was derived from conversations with a broad team of Caltrans staff assigned to this effort. The MRCA's first step is to enter into a cooperative agreement with Caltrans that defines the scope and payment arrangements for the PSR. If funded the MRCA may also use a small portion of the funding up front to produce preferred design concepts for Caltrans to evaluate. The budget is tight with minimal opportunity to change course. If course changes are necessary, the possibility is open that the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area may contribute financially to the project via a Task Agreement with the MRCA.

In the interim all of the involved agencies are working to maximize the function of the existing Liberty Canyon Road underpass.