

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: November 2, 2015

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

Subject: **Agenda Item 12: Consideration of resolution authorizing an official request to the California Department of Transportation for a Transfer of Jurisdiction to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy of Sepulveda Pass right-of-way for cross-405 freeway wildlife corridor permanent habitat protection purposes, City of Los Angeles.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing an official request to the California Department of Transportation for a Transfer of Jurisdiction to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy of Sepulveda Pass right-of-way for cross-405 freeway wildlife corridor permanent habitat protection purposes.

Background: The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) has been working cooperatively with Santa Monica Mountains park agencies over the past approximately six years to provide wildlife movement infrastructure across the 405 freeway and corresponding measures such as customized fencing plans and landscaping to enhance wildlife access to existing freeway crossing structures.

For these new cross-freeway wildlife movement systems to be effective, and remain effective well into the future, the location and qualities of the Caltrans rights-of-ways that connect them to surrounding natural lands must not be impaired. The Conservancy understands that future transportation projects through the Sepulveda Pass will probably make demands on currently unused portions of the Caltrans rights-of-ways. However, staff has identified a swath of land that contributes both to existing and future right-of-way wildlife movement but that is located far enough away, and above, the central transportation corridor to have diminutive future transportation value. One of the attached figures shows this subject area on the west side of the 405 freeway north of Mulholland Drive.

Caltrans and MTA have an ongoing obligation to fulfill native tree planting mitigation measures from the recent, multi-year 405 improvement project. Many native trees have and will be planted on Caltrans rights-of-way in the Sepulveda Pass area. One of the identified tree planting areas is this same area between Mulholland Drive and the eastern terminus of Mulholland Place. The tree planting area will serve as a high quality wildlife corridor.

A second attached figure shows the complexity of potential wildlife movement paths associated with animals both reaching and exiting the Mulholland Drive freeway overpass and the Skirball

Center Drive overpass. The unused Caltrans right-of-way north of Mulholland Drive and west of the freeway is a relatively large habitat block slated for a forest of native trees. This habitat block forms an essential staging and receiving area for animals using the Mulholland Drive overpass at night. The ecological qualities of this habitat block will also only increase as the post-freeway-construct disturbance heals and the planted trees grow. Caltrans environmental staff is cognizant of how right-of-way fencing in this location and improve animal movement.

This habitat block also connects directly to the terminus of infrequently-used Mulholland Place. Mulholland Place provides a decent connection to the habitat block partially located on top of the Sepulveda Boulevard tunnel, that in turn connects to a finger of core habitat on the south side of Mulholland Drive. A standard Caltrans right-of-way fence separates the Caltrans right-of-way from Mulholland Place, but locals have told staff that deer in particular jump right over it. A picture was recently circulated that showed a mountain lion eating a deer at the side of Mulholland Place a short distance away. In short, the connectivity value of this site is significant even with the right-of-way fence.

To permanently protect this habitat linkage component on Caltrans right-of-way, staff is recommending that the Conservancy make an official request for Caltrans to transfer jurisdiction of an approximately 4.8 acre area to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Transfer of Jurisdiction (TOJ) is the mechanism used to transfer jurisdiction and control of state property between state agencies. In recent times Caltrans has twice completed TOJs with the Conservancy along the 101 freeway.

The 4.8 acres is designed to foremost provide adequate habitat connectivity between Mulholland Place and Mulholland Drive. Secondly it is configured to encompass a significant block of the tree mitigation area located outside of potential future transportation areas. It specifically avoids most of the now abandoned construction staging area next to Mulholland Drive because of its future value to Caltrans for such purposes. It avoids a dirt access road that reaches deep northward into the habitat block and greater tree planting area. The 4.8 acres are functional as configured, but any spatial additions along its perimeter would enhance that function.

If approved, staff would write a formal letter to Caltrans with a request for the subject TOJ to the Conservancy. Some reviewing agencies may require payment from the Conservancy but the amounts are not considered prohibitive to move forward. The proposed action also authorizes formal requests for any other Caltrans rights-of-ways in the 405 freeway-Sepulveda Pass complex.