

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

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Diana Kitching
City of Los Angeles Planning Department
200 N. Spring Street, Room 750
Los Angeles, California 90012

**Harvard-Westlake Parking Improvement Plan
Recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report Comments
ENV-2013-1950-EAF — SCH No. 2013041033**

Dear Ms. Kitching:

As stated in the Notice of Completion and Availability, the Conservancy confirms that its prior comments on the Notice of Preparation and Draft Environmental Impact Report will be addressed in the Final Environmental Impact Report. The Conservancy remains opposed to the subject project because all of the project changes represented in the Recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report (RDEIR) expand the footprint of either the direct or indirect project impacts. No impact avoidance was integrated into the project modifications and additions.

The RDEIR range of alternatives remains deficient. All of the development project footprints, other than the four-home-Alternative 2, have the same basic original horizontal footprint of the proposed project. Alternative 4 apparently has a 25 percent reduced project footprint but the RDEIR included no dimensions and did not describe where such reduction would occur. The alternatives analysis claims its ecological impacts would be similar to that of the proposed project. How can a decision maker analyze Alternative 4 as reduced impact alternative without an adequate visual or written project footprint description?

As requested by Conservancy in earlier comments, the range of alternatives needs to include a reduced footprint, non-residential development in which the footprint is pulled dramatically (approximately 50 percent) closer to Coldwater Canyon Avenue to dramatically reduce grading, biological, and visual impacts. That development could include parking or various building space that would either free up space within the east campus for desired uses or meet a portion of the proposed parking objectives.

The proposed project and most of its development alternatives would result in the most severe native woodland impacts in the Santa Monica Mountains east of the 405 freeway in at least three decades. The woodland proposed to be lost is part of the largest contiguous block of habitat on the north face of the range between the Cahuenga Pass and the 405 freeway -- absent only the Fryman Canyon core habitat area. These few remaining core habitat blocks are critical stepping stones and refugia for eastern Santa Monica Mountains wildlife populations. Often the extreme outer boundaries of such refugia provide special habitat value either for predators avoiding intra-species aggression, bearing of young, or prey seeking sub-refugia that is situated as far as possible from the most frequented game trails and travel paths.

The carrying capacity of the eastern Santa Monica Mountains for most medium and large-sized mammal species and many reptile species is not known. Permanent habitat loss in this area occurs on a near-daily basis and no new habitat is added. The ongoing drought has dramatically affected the canopy cover in native walnut woodlands. Wildlife water sources become more ephemeral each subsequent year as groundwater reserves are not replenished. Recreational use in the woodland areas of Wilacre Park continues to expand and adversely impact wildlife carrying capacity. The subject part of the range could well be at a tipping point for the continued permanent presence of bobcats and grey fox.

The proposed project and all of its development alternatives (other than Alternative 2) would permanently remove a substantial area of native woodland and have permanent indirect adverse impacts on surrounding offsite lands including land owned by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA). An acre of woodland typically has much more per-acre habitat value than grassland, chaparral and coastal sage scrub. It is also a less common habitat type as reflected by its special community status with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The RDEIR is deficient for not addressing the substantial incremental degradation of a key habitat block on the north slope of the Santa Monica Mountains between the Cahuenga Pass and the 405 freeway. There are few places where the habitat blocks on the north and south slope of the range in this east-west segment have strong connectivity across Mulholland Drive. One of the largest such connectivity zones is the southern end of the subject habitat block leading into Franklin Canyon and Franklin Canyon Park.

Without question – tree replacement – the only proposed biological mitigation measure that addresses permanent habitat loss and degradation does not offset the direct,

permanent loss of at least 3.3 horizontal acres of walnut woodland and its unique soils. The 3.3 acres probably translates into almost 4 acres when slope acres are considered.

New habitat cannot be created, but more existing habitat can be protected as mitigation with a direct nexus to the reduction of high quality habitat in a key core habitat block. An earlier Conservancy letter suggested that the proposed project include a mitigation measure to permanently protect a minimum of 50 acres of habitat between the Cahuenga Pass and the 405 freeway. That suggested mitigation further specified that at least ten of the fifty acres support existing native walnut woodland and that twenty-five of the acres be provided if fee simple to a public park agency. To provide adequate mitigation the 50 acres would need to be connected to some other habitat block between the Cahuenga Pass and the 405 freeway.

That mitigation acreage could be accumulated in many fee simple pieces and conservation easements as long as it meets the prescription and objective of the habitat mitigation measure as finally adopted. Such mitigation could be costly but the visual impacts of the project and the resulting unknown permanent decrease in the carrying capacity of the subject portion of the Santa Monica Mountains warrant significant mitigation. The MRCA is an optimal agency to assist the school in finding and accepting such mitigation land interests.

If the school demonstrates that it is prohibitive to acquire such mitigation land interests between the Cahuenga Pass and 405 freeway, the field of acquisition area should be expanded to include the unprotected lands surrounding Griffith Park east of the Cahuenga Pass. Fifty percent of such land must be protected within two months of the issuance of any grading permits. The remainder must be protected within the next eight months. For every acre not permanently protected with a conservation easement or fee simple to a public agency by each of those deadlines, the school would have a letter of credit that guarantees \$500,000 per acre to the MRCA available to be put into land acquisition escrows and to reimburse appraisal and title report costs for properties that meet the mitigation criteria. Such a significant cost per acre is necessary to insure adequate incentive for the school to complete the mitigation requirements.

Please direct any questions to Paul Edelman of our staff at 310-589-3200 ext. 128 or at the above letterhead address.

Sincerely,

Irma Munoz
Chairperson