



MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

Los Angeles River Center & Gardens
570 West Avenue Twenty-six, Suite 100
Los Angeles, California 90065
Phone (323) 221-9944

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Governing Board

FROM: 
Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Officer

DATE: May 7, 2008

SUBJECT: **Agenda Item VI: Consideration of resolution authorizing application to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy for a grant of Proposition 84 funds for the preservation, protection and restoration of Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve, Calabasas.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Governing Board adopt the attached resolution authorizing application to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy for a grant of Proposition 84 funds in the amount of \$300,000 for the preservation, protection and restoration of Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve, Calabasas.

Background: The Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve is one of the most ecologically significant pieces of undeveloped land in southern California's Mediterranean ecosystem. Wildlife corridors through the site connect the Simi Hills and Santa Susana Mountains with the Santa Monica Mountains. Endangered and threatened species exist on the property, including the California red-legged frog and a large stand of San Fernando Valley spineflower, once thought to be extirpated from this region. The preserve includes several different habitat types, including native grasslands which support the area's raptor population.

The Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve's ranch house was built in the 1930s by George Barrett, and is presently made available to the public for special events and filming. Additionally, the MRCA's Interpretive Division leads various public programs on the property. The ranch house has original wood sliding doors, a stone patio and pathway, lawn and planted areas and an orchard. Several nearby structures house the resident caretakers and some volunteer offices.

In the fall of 2005, fire swept through the property. MRCA firefighters along with outside fire departments saved all the structures. Many of the trees in the orchard and around the ranch house were scorched. Some of the trees have recovered; others have died. Many wood features on the house (doors and windows) dried out due to the close proximity to the flames. Fencing and signage throughout the preserve were damaged.

To improve public safety and ADA accessibility on the property, some of the park's facilities need to be upgraded. MRCA staff plans to improve the paving around the ranch house to allow for better public access. The existing paving is rough and broken up in sections. It needs to be replaced to provide smooth surfaces for visitors. Ramps will be added to allow for ADA accessibility. One restroom will be renovated to meet ADA accessibility standards. The original exterior sliding doors on the house need to be repaired to seal the house properly against wind-driven rain and rodents. Some of the flooring in the ranch house need to be replaced. Staff intends to restore utilities including gas to the ranch house. Exterior lighting will be added to increase public safety for nighttime events and campfire programs. Fencing, gates and signage will be added to direct visitors and keep them out of sensitive areas.

In addition to these hardscape renovations, the landscape areas are in need of rehabilitation. A previous grant covered the installation of two new water tanks to serve all the buildings, the irrigation and fire-fighting resources on the property. An overhaul of the irrigation system was begun by volunteers with significant donation of materials by outside vendors. The MRCA staff plans to complete the irrigation project in-house. The removal of non-native eucalyptus and other trees damaged during the fires has left some areas in need of restoration. There are opportunities to add trees and other landscape plants to the historic orchard and the windbreak around the ranch house. Some new lawn areas will be created around the ranch house to increase usable space for public events.

Consideration: The grant from the Conservancy would be in the amount of \$300,000.