

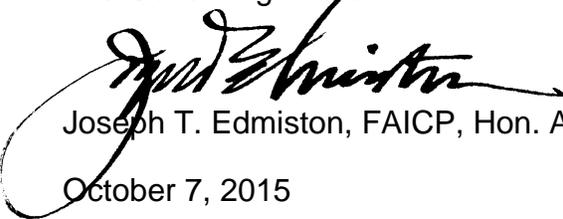


MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

Los Angeles River Center & Gardens
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Los Angeles, California 90065
Phone (323) 221-9944

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Governing Board

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

DATE: October 7, 2015

SUBJECT: **Agenda Item XXI: Consideration of resolution authorizing: (a) conditional support of the proposed Andora Estates project; (b) entering into an agreement with the project applicant; (c) authorizing the acceptance of temporary and revocable conservation easements over portions of APNs 2724-007-002 and 004, up to approximately 66 acres; (d) authorizing the future acceptance of conservation easements and fee simple interests over the same land subject to the temporary easements, and (e) authorizing the future acceptance of easements over additional deed restricted portions and trails of APN 2724-007-004 up to approximately 13.5 acres, Simi Hills, Chatsworth, City of Los Angeles.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Governing Board adopt the attached resolution authorizing: (a) conditional support of the proposed Andora Estates project; (b) entering into an agreement with the project applicant; (c) authorizing the acceptance of temporary and revocable conservation easements over portions of APNs 2724-007-002 and 004, up to approximately 66 acres; (d) authorizing the future acceptance of conservation easements and fee simple interests over the same land subject to the temporary easements, and (e) authorizing the future acceptance of easements over additional deed restricted portions and trails of APN 2724-007-004 up to approximately 13.5 acres.

Background: The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) adopted the attached the comment conditionally supporting the subject Andora Estates project at its August 17, 2015 meeting. Typically neither the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) or the Conservancy support development projects. Such support requires a well designed project with a substantial and proportional fee simple open space dedication. Any development project would be better for the environment if additional units are eliminated. However there is a balance point in which the risks of fighting for those extra units is offset by guaranteed public open space. The subject 91-acre project is located (see attached map) in the Simi Hills in between Santa Susana Pass State Historic Park and Chatsworth Oaks Park (Chatsworth Reservoir Nature Preserve).

The Conservancy and many community entities have battled development on the subject property for over a decade. The lack of a secondary access has held a sizeable subdivision in check. However, the current owner has obtained a secondary access and has convinced the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council to support a reduced density 33-home project in lieu of a proposed 42-unit project.

The developer has done a solid job of restricting the disturbance footprint to a tight area that for all intents and purposes is fully shielded from existing public lands. The proposed subdivision footprint only when combined with an additional contiguous, offsite 3.5-acre parcel provides an ample habitat linkage from the Simi Hills central core habitat area to the Chatsworth Reservoir Nature Preserve. The minimum wildlife corridor width measured horizontally is 625 feet from five proposed homes and then the width increases progressively at a substantial rate. The minimum corridor width with the slope factored in is in excess of 700 feet. If the City would agree to permit the subdivision without street lights, the wildlife corridor could be further improved.

The developer's proposal to lock in the additional 3.5-acre parcel and conservation easements on approximately 31 of the 33 private parcels in a pre-entitlement agreement with the MRCA, along with other factors, convinced the Conservancy to conditionally support the 33-home project. The other factors included all of the public trail easements going to the MRCA as well as the large open space area. The developer has also agreed to provide \$15,000 to the MRCA to set up and maintain signage on the site. The marginal potential gains from further fighting to reduce the project are counter balanced by the reasonable secured project footprint and open space benefits. The proposed actions include the MRCA conditionally supporting the project.

The proposed action would first authorize the MRCA to accept temporary and revocable conservation easements on the large open space lot and the offsite 3.5-acre parcel (APN 2724-007-002) that is not part of the tract map. The attached figure shows these as phase one acquisitions.

If the 33-home tract map is approved (shown as phase two on the attached figure), both of these conservation easements would automatically convert to fee simple title for the MRCA. With such approval then as part of phase two, numerous conservation easements on the individual private lots will vest with the MRCA. The conservation easements would prohibit all uses other than brush clearance and native plant habitat restoration. No fencing would be allowed off of the 33 development pads.

In the proposed agreement with the MRCA, the developer also agreed to reduce the grading and pad footprint on lot 11 and for lots 25 and 26 to have reduced-height two-story houses to reduce the overall project height.

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The project's Draft Environmental Impact Report is scheduled to be released in November.

The advantages to the applicant are potential tax benefit and early project support. The advantages to the public and the Simi Hills ecosystem are substantial guaranteed land protections with zero reliance on City condition and mitigation measure enforcement. In addition the public receives 3.5 acres and \$15,000 of operations money that would be difficult to secure without a cooperative agreement with the developer.

This item was continued from the MRCA's August meeting, to allow staff counsel to understand the proposed temporary and revocable easement mechanism.