



MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Governing Board

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

DATE: May 2, 2007

SUBJECT: **Agenda Item XI: Consideration of resolution authorizing the use of Santa Monica Mountains Open Space Preservation Assessment District No. 1 funds to acquire an option on APNs 5565-003-036, 037, 038, 039, 040, and 041 located at the southwest corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Mulholland Drive, Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Governing Board adopt the attached resolution authorizing the use of up to \$200,000 Santa Monica Mountains Open Space Preservation Assessment District No. 1 funds to acquire an option on APNs 5565-003-036, 037, 038, 039, 040, and 041 located at the southwest corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Mulholland Drive in Laurel Canyon.

Background: The six subject parcels are under a common ownership. The property is important to the viewshed from both the Mulholland Scenic Parkway and Laurel Canyon Boulevard. It is also critical to wildlife movement across Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Staff and representatives from the 5th and 4th City Council Districts have discussed a plan to create a loop walking trail from Laurel Canyon Park and the MRCA's Elrita Bowl property to the west, through subject parcels, via the Mulholland Drive right-of-way. Administrative and neighborhood access is available via an extension of the southernmost parcel to Amor Drive. In addition the site has excellent walk-in access from Mulholland Drive.

The site consists of chaparral covered slopes along the two arterial roadways and a series of terraced fill areas that apparently were placed there in the 1950s with construction of Laurel Canyon Boulevard. The current owner has recent geological reports that verify the compaction and stability of the fill. These terraces and an active spring near the southeastern corner of parcel 041 provide excellent opportunities for low cost habitat restoration. Wildlife use the spring as water source. The bowl terrain of the ownership creates numerous areas where traffic noise and vehicles are hardly detectable.

Staff appraised the property in 2003 and attempted to put together a deal with Santa Monica Mountains Open Space Preservation Assessment District funds. A combination of both the cost and the Assessment District lawsuit against the MRCA prevented that deal from progressing. The owner of two additional vacant lots at the southeast corner of the subject property remains interested in the protection of the property and has expressed a willingness to provide conservation easements to maintain the highest possible quality wildlife corridor to the western curb of Laurel Canyon Boulevard.

The applicant had a single residence project on parcel 041 approved by the Mulholland Design Review Board (MDRB). On appeal the approval was dismissed by the South Valley Area Planning Commission in March. The applicant has filed a legal action against the City and intends to return to the MDRB in May. Because lot 041 is critical to the wildlife movement corridor, and contains the spring, it really should be protected. However, the acquisition of parcel 041 adversely affects the development potential of the remaining lots. Likewise if parcel 041 is developed, the value of the remaining parcels increases significantly. The optimal solution is to acquire all six lots for park purposes. Both to temporarily prevent the owner from pursuing entitlements, and to tie the property up for fund raising purposes, it is critical to be able to make an immediate option payment. The owner is cooperative but needs a concrete financial incentive to table his development plans.

The high visibility of this parcel makes it an excellent candidate to acquire with private funds and to provide naming opportunities. The expansion of the Laurel Canyon Park trail system and constant traffic and pedestrian flow should engender significant financial participation. A strong corpus of Laurel Canyon activists are ready to spearhead this fund raising effort in cooperation with the two Council offices.

Less than \$450,000 of the Area D funding remains. With existing real estate values, few high impact parcels can be obtained with that amount, with the exception of inexpensive tax defaulted parcels which staff continues to pursue. The greatest impact that can be made with a portion of the remaining funding is to use it for option purposes to leverage a ten times greater amount of private or other public funding. The staff recommendation is to authorize \$200,000 for a series of option payments. An other item on this agenda authorizes \$200,000 of Area D funding as a contribution to the Runyon Canyon Park adjacent parcel. Assuming the \$400,000 is expended for those purposes the remaining amount will be available for acquisition costs, tax defaulted parcels, and staff time.

The District No. 1 Citizens Oversight Committee determined the appropriateness of the parcels at its inaugural meeting in 2003, and it subsequently adopted a resolution at a April 11, 2007 meeting to affirm its interest in using Assessment District funds to acquire the property.

A small amount of brushing is required for parcels on parcel 41 in particular. The road side brushing is all located on City fee simple rights-of-ways.