

The Malibu Times

[Print Page](#)

Malibu Planning Commission endorses mountains conservancy parks plan

Opponents look to City Council to defeat the plan. Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Executive Director Joe Edmiston says he is "satisfied with the outcome."

By Jonathan Friedman / Assistant Editor

After hearing from nearly 70 speakers in opposition to the project, the Planning Commission voted 5-0 last Tuesday to recommend the City Council approve a Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy proposal for local park development, including the construction of overnight camping facilities. The plan goes before the City Council on Nov. 13.

The proposal, which mainly focuses on the SMMC parks at Ramirez, Escondido and Corral canyons and city-owned Charmlee Wilderness Park, is a revised version of a 2006 SMMC plan that would have avoided city review and only needed approval from the California Coastal Commission.

"This is a step forward in what has been an adversarial relationship," Commissioner John Sibert said.

Commissioner Les Moss said the city must take advantage of its opportunity to have a say in the matter.

"If we don't do that, the conservancy, which is a wonderful organization, a state organization [that] is very powerful, can do something that we might not like," Moss said. "That is to go around the city and say, 'We don't care what the city does, if you don't do what we want, we'll go straight to the Coastal Commission.'"

But those who spoke in opposition to the project during the more than four-hour hearing, which was all but two speakers, were not swayed by Moss' comments.

"There is a major sense of disenfranchisement," said Malibu Township Council Board member Marshall Thompson this week. "We had nearly 70 speakers against it, and the commission just stiffed us."

The MTC and other opponents, including Ramirez Canyon and Escondido Canyon homeowners, plan to spend the next few weeks preparing for what they would consider to be a more favorable outcome from the City Council.

"I believe the City Council members in the next few days are going to be bombarded with homeowners' requests that they defend the city's rights," Malibu Township Council President Jefferson Wagner said this week.

In addition to its vote to endorse the proposal, the commission adopted a list of recommendations for the proposal. They include the construction of a connector road from Kanan Dume Road to Ramirez Canyon and that a parking lot at Escondido Canyon can only be built if a study proves it is needed. SMMC Executive Director Joe Edmiston disagreed with the latter recommendation as well as some others, but he said overall he was pleased with the commission's vote.

"The outcome was satisfactory," Edmiston said. "But I still remain kind of sorry that we can't have more of a dialogue ... people were talking passed each other and not having a dialogue during the hearing."

There are many aspects to the complicated proposal. Some of the major features include the development of 26 overnight camping facilities at Charmlee Park, and Ramirez and Corral canyons, construction of an 18-space parking lot at the top of Winding Way, improvements to trails to create the Coastal Slope trail that will

connect numerous parks throughout the city and unincorporated portions of Malibu, as well as improvements to the transportation systems connecting the parks.

The current proposal amends the city's Local Coastal Program to allow for the projects. All the elements of the project, including the construction of sites and trail enhancements, would need to get individual coastal development permits from the city.

The Coastal Commission has the final say on approving the LCP amendment, although a City Council rejection of the amendment would stop the project in its tracks before it reaches the Coastal Commission. A council rejection cannot be appealed to the Coastal Commission.

Overnight camping at Charmlee Park and Ramirez Canyon are the most controversial elements to the proposal because of a perceived fire danger. The plan prohibits campfires, and limits cooking to the use of propane stoves, but neighbors living near the parks still said they are worried.

"Fire in these parks so close to the homes can start almost instantly and sweep down to Pacific Coast Highway before the Fire Department can even get their act together or bring in additional help from out of town," said former Mayor Walt Keller.

The SMMC says it has addressed the issue of fire safety with large water tanks at Ramirez Canyon and a staff is trained in fire safety and rescue, as well as the use of vehicles equipped with water tanks.

Some people questioned why the Los Angeles County Fire Department had no representatives at the hearing and has not commented on the project. Assistant Fire Chief Reginald Lee, who is in charge of the Malibu area, said this week the parks are not within his jurisdiction.

"This is a political issue, and if we were asked for our opinion, we wouldn't give one," Lee said.

Another contentious issue for the Ramirez Canyon homeowners is the inclusion in the proposal for various "special events" at the Ramirez Canyon property, including 16 per year with up to 200 guests.

This dispute is involved in ongoing litigation between the homeowners and the SMMC. Among many reasons for opposing this, they have cited the added traffic to the narrow and fragile Ramirez Canyon Road. That is one of the reasons for the proposed access road from Kanan Dume, which Edmiston said this week he supports, although he was not sure if it was feasible either to acquire the land for this or environmentally possible for the road to be built.

The president of the Ramirez Canyon Preservation Fund, which represents the homeowners, wrote in an e-mail that he was disappointed the commission did not further address the special events issue.

"We know, however, that the City Council is well aware of the unique constraints of the property, and of the significant impacts that intensive use will cause to the residents of the canyon," President Rick Mullen wrote. "Therefore, we will redouble our efforts to assist the council in striking a reasonable balance between the conservancy's plans and the peace and quiet of our rural residential neighborhood."

Another complaint from homeowners involves the parking lot at the top of Winding Way Road. An existing parking area already sits at the bottom of the street off Pacific Coast Highway, but Edmiston said the new one is needed so that people don't have to walk up Winding Way to reach a trail near the proposed parking lot. People currently walk along the side of the road, which is a public easement, but Edmiston said those walking on the easement drift into the street, creating a dangerous situation.

Local homeowners said building the new parking lot, and increasing traffic on the road to access that parking area would create the dangerous situation.

"The name of the road is Winding Way for a reason," said Dan Cislo, past president of the local homeowners association. "If you increase the number of drivers on that road, it's going to be a problem."

In the next three issues of The Malibu Times preceding the Nov. 13 City Council hearing, the newspaper will go in-depth on the various issues of this complicated plan.

Malibu Parks Public Access Enhancement Plan highlights

Charmlee Wilderness Park:

- Eight camping sites, including one for disabled visitors
- New self-contained public restroom
- Expansion of picnic area
- Expansion of vehicle turnaround to provide for five additional parking spaces

Ramirez Canyon Park:

- Three ADA-compliant day-use areas
- Two camping sites for disabled visitors
- Restoration of approximately 200 linear feet of riparian area adjacent to Ramirez Canyon Creek
- New public restroom

Escondido Canyon Park:

- 18-space parking lot at top of Winding Way
- New restroom

Corral Canyon Park:

- 16 camping sites, including 11 for disabled visitors

The proposal also includes the enhancements of various trails to create a continuous trail through a large portion of Malibu with various access points. Also, it calls for the expansion of the Park Link Shuttle Program and the city's Point Dume Nature Preserve Shuttle Program.