




MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Governing Board

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

DATE: June 4, 2014

SUBJECT: **Agenda Item XI: Consideration of resolution authorizing the use of mitigation funds to acquire APN 648-0-270-325, conditionally from Ballona Ecosystem Education Project, comprised of approximately 118 acres on the north slope of Chatsworth Peak, unincorporated Ventura County.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Governing Board adopt the attached resolution authorizing the use of mitigation funds to acquire APN 648-0-270-325, conditionally from the Ballona Ecosystem Education Project, comprised of approximately 118 acres on the north slope of Chatsworth Peak at the north end of the Simi Hills.

Background: The subject parcel located on the north slope of Chatsworth Peak has long been a priority acquisition for the Santa Susana Pass habitat linkage that connects the Simi Hills with the Santa Susana Mountains both over and under the 118 freeway. An alternative route for the Rim of the Valley Trail also passes through the property, as shown on the attached map.

A CEQA mitigation measure for the expansion of the Rocky Peak Road 118 Freeway interchange at the top of the pass provided \$236,000 to the MRCA to acquire any or all of nine specific properties in the habitat linkage along Box Canyon Road and Santa Susana Pass Road including the subject parcel. One 10-acre trail and conservation easement has been acquired to date. Caltrans is eager to see the remainder of the funding expended. So far one other landowner was not a willing seller at the appraised value. The mitigation fund cannot be used for appraisals or staff time.

The Ballona Ecosystem Education Project acquired the subject 118-acre property earlier this year for \$350,000. The Project's board has conditionally agreed to sell the property to the MRCA for the approximately \$200,000 amount left in the mitigation fund. Staff has not yet had the property appraised and prefers to have a signed offer before expending increasing rare appraisal funding. The Project conducted an Environmental Assessment prior their acquiring the parcel.

For the proposed sales price, the Seller has required a couple conditions. One condition is that the MRCA post its regular park name sign with the name Rex Frankel Wilderness Preserve (or similar). The sign must be clearly visible from Santa Susana Pass Road. The second condition is that the MRCA be willing to allow the construction of a couple park bench sites in the high saddle of the property adjacent to existing trails. Neither of those requests are expected to diminish the habitat value or visitor experience.

The last condition of the sale is that the MRCA creatively search for ways to provide written assurance that the property will never be sold or developed. The fact that the property would be acquired with one-hundred percent funding from a CEQA mitigation measure helps with that process.

The MRCA staff inspection of the property revealed a driveway encroachment on the eastern side of the parcel. Whether or not this encroachment is legal does not affect the staff recommendation to acquire the subject parcel. The property has lots of existing usable trails and is directly across the street from another property. Maintenance costs should be minimal.

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