

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

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November 26, 2007

Hon. Marc Jacobsen, Chair
Conejo Recreation and Park District
Hon. Andrew Fox, Mayor
City of Thousand Oaks
Intergovernmental Committee Members
403 West Hillcrest Drive
Thousand Oaks, California 91360

Rancho Potrero Open Space Planning Meeting

Dear Chair Jacobsen, Mayor Fox, and Committee Members:

We understand that the Intergovernmental Committee of the Conejo Recreation and Park District and the City of Thousand Oaks will be meeting on December 5 to discuss public access improvements to the Rancho Potrero Open Space, the property still owned by the joint powers Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority. The Conservancy supports improvements that provide better public access, enjoyment, and appreciation of open space parklands, and we are happy to assist the Conejo Park District, City, and the Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency in your conceptual planning effort.

Neighbor concerns about lights, parties, crime, and traffic are not new to any park planner, but appropriate design, park management, and attention to environmental constraints are expected from park professionals. The Conejo Park District is a highly-respected agency, recognized throughout the state for its park, recreation, and open space leadership and accomplishments, and for its community involvement efforts.

You and your boards are certainly knowledgeable about the history of the property, but we have included the following background to recapitulate:

The property in question has been the subject of a series of intense local controversies for decades, dating back to its days as a private horse breeding ranch whose owner was murdered; to private development plans including a 5000-unit "senior citizen village" and later large lot estates, and even preliminary consideration as a site for a state prison. Further controversies swirled over park acquisition attempts, expectations of publicly-owned horse stables and publicly-owned golf course; then more *sturm und drang* over the fate and location of a decade-long "temporary" horse stable operation. Since the parkland was acquired in 1993, the massive Dos Vientos Ranch development has been largely

completed, so there are now homes immediately to the north of Potrero Road. And ironically, there is now local question on how the public at large can best enjoy the significant parkland investment for typical open space passive uses such as picnicking and outdoor education day camps while still maintaining open space parkland values.

In 1993, the MRCA purchased the nearly 640-acre George Paterias Huck property, a portion of the original Broome Ranch holdings, for \$4.2 million on behalf of itself, the Conservancy, the City of Thousand Oaks, the Conejo Recreation and Park District, and the National Park Service. Funding was provided by all the entities. The City contributed \$1 million, and the Park District provided \$1.9 million. MRCA and the Conservancy provided the rest of the funds to complete the purchase but later carved out a 312 acre portion for the National Park Service's fee acquisition as an addition to Rancho Sierra Vista. The operating assumption has always been that the joint powers Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency would manage the remaining acreage and eventually take title.

Community meetings with equestrians some years ago provided input to site horse and park facilities on the existing barn and trailer pads for the old Huck Olympia Farms site, hidden from view of Potrero Road and the Dos Vientos neighbors; possibly reusing timbers donated from the historic Dos Vientos Barn, which had to be dismantled to make way for the Dos Vientos development.

The Olympia Farms site then fell from favor after new community involvement, and about three years ago the 20-acre portion of the property along Potrero Road transferred from MRCA to COSCA and the City for an equestrian operation sublease awarded to Circle K, a private operator, which replaces the former 'temporary' Two Winds Ranch. The flat land all along Potrero Road was a former barley field.

The original intent for the City and the District's participation was to preserve the property from development and to provide for protection of open space and appropriate recreational opportunities; an intent shared by all the parties in interest.

The Park District and a community focus group has been working to develop concepts, and to address vocal concerns about inappropriate uses, parking, a "corporate party pavilion," and consistency with park plans and values. The current discussion on where to site trailhead parking, how much parking to accommodate, shade structures, tree-planting, interpretive signage, and picnic tables, for example, we understand will be further elucidated at the December 5 Inter Governmental meeting.

COSCA prepared an environmental constraints analysis some years ago to identify sensitive areas to be protected. Trailhead parking should be provided in one or more locations. At this time, unless one is boarding or renting a horse at the Circle K Stables and able to park there, there is no onsite parking for trail users, and only a narrow shoulder along Potrero.

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(Neighboring homeowners can walk or ride in). Shade structures, picnic tables, water, and accessible features can enhance open space programs, such as day camp trips, by park district outdoor recreation staff and community groups. Existing trails were established to avoid sensitive plant locations. Wildlife-porous fencing, removal of any old barbed wire fencing, minimizing or abjuring any night-lighting are additional elements that should be considered. Likewise, the old Olympia Farms site provides opportunity for day use improvements and a scenic view spot. If at all possible the timbers stored on site from the old Dos Vientos Barn should be incorporated and interpreted. Finally, any new improvement features must also be compatible with the Army Corps of Engineers wetlands easement granted several years ago by MRCA.

If you have any questions, please contact Mr. Paul Edelman, Chief of Natural Resources and Planning, at (310) 589-3200, extension 128.

Sincerely,

ELIZABETH CHEADLE
Chairperson