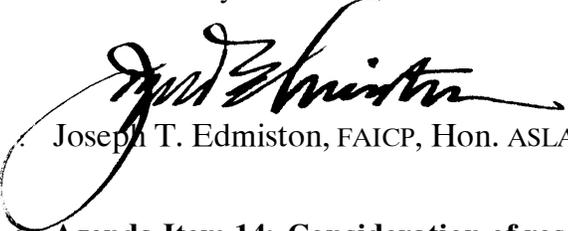


Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: May 12, 2008

From : 
Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 14: Consideration of resolution authorizing a grant of Proposition 84 funds to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for the preservation, protection, and restoration of Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve, Calabasas.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing a grant of Proposition 84 funds to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for the preservation, protection, and restoration of Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve, Calabasas, in the amount of \$300,000.

Legislative Authority: Sections 33204.2(a), 33204.27(a), and 75060(d)(1) of the Public Resources Code.

Background: The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84), allocated funds to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy in Chapter 7, 75060(d)(1) of the Public Resources Code, for the protection of beaches, bays and coastal waters and watersheds, including projects to prevent the contamination and degradation of coastal waters and watersheds, projects to protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands, and projects and expenditures to promote the access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state.

Public Resources Code Section 33204(c): “The Conservancy may, in accordance with the priorities of the plan . . . award grants to state agencies, cities, counties, resource conservation districts, and park and recreation districts for the purpose of acquiring sites identified as necessary for park, recreation, or conservation purposes and for development of essential related public facilities.”

The Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve is one of the most ecologically significant pieces of undeveloped land in southern California's Mediterranean ecosystem. Wildlife corridors through the site connect the Simi Hills and Santa Susana Mountains with the Santa Monica Mountains. Endangered and threatened species exist on the property, including the California red-legged frog and a large stand of San Fernando Valley spineflower, once thought to be extirpated from this region. The preserve includes several different habitat types, including native grasslands which support the area's raptor population.

The Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve's ranch house was built in the 1930s by George Barrett, and is presently made available to the public for special events and filming. Additionally, the MRCA's Interpretive Division leads various public programs on the property. The ranch house has original wood sliding doors, a stone patio and pathway, lawn and planted areas and an orchard. Several nearby structures house the resident caretakers and some volunteer offices.

In the fall of 2005, fire swept through the property. MRCA firefighters along with outside fire departments saved all the structures. Many of the trees in the orchard and around the ranch house were scorched. Some of the trees have recovered; others have died. Many wood features on the house (doors and windows) dried out due to the close proximity to the flames. Fencing and signage throughout the preserve were damaged.

To improve public safety and ADA accessibility on the property, some of the park's facilities need to be upgraded. MRCA staff plans to improve the paving around the ranch house to allow for better public access. The existing paving is rough and broken up in sections. It needs to be replaced to provide smooth surfaces for visitors. Ramps will be added to allow for ADA accessibility. One restroom will be renovated to meet ADA accessibility standards. The original exterior sliding doors on the house need to be repaired to seal the house properly against wind-driven rain and rodents. Some of the flooring in the ranch house need to be replaced. Staff intends to restore utilities including gas to the ranch house. Exterior lighting will be added to increase public safety for nighttime events and campfire programs. Fencing, gates and signage will be added to direct visitors and keep them out of sensitive areas.

In addition to these hardscape renovations, the landscape areas are in need of rehabilitation. A previous grant covered the installation of two new water tanks to serve all the buildings, the irrigation and fire-fighting resources on the property. An overhaul of the irrigation system was begun by volunteers with significant donation of materials by outside vendors. The MRCA staff plans to complete the irrigation project in-house. The removal of non-native eucalyptus and other trees damaged during the fires has left some areas in need of restoration. There are opportunities to add trees and other landscape plants to the historic orchard and the windbreak around the ranch house. Some new lawn areas will be created around the ranch house to increase usable space for public events.

Consideration: The amount of the grant to the MRCA would be in the amount of \$300,000.