STATE OF CALIFORNIA–THE RESOURCES AGENCY

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, *Governor*

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Vista Canyon Ranch Comments
Master Case No. 07-127 - EIR 07-02

Dear Mr. Hogan:

The Conservancy did not make comments on the Notice of Preparation for the proposed project in the Santa Clara River. However, because of the regional importance of the onsite habitat and viewshed, a comment letter is warranted prior to the expected release of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR). The Santa Clara River is a regional wildlife corridor of Statewide significance. The vast majority of the project area impacts are in Los Angeles County's new expanded Significant Ecological Area for the Santa Clara River. This was confirmed by our staff with County staff at the end of 2008. Our staff has toured the site with the applicants and conducted its own reconnaissance this spring. We look forward to working with the City and the applicant to improve the project's fit with the site constraints.

Perhaps the most egregious post-1970s development approvals along the Santa Clara River are the chain of residential projects located immediately downstream from the proposed project on the same bank of the river. From both a planning and ecological standpoint, what makes those downstream projects so inappropriate is a combination of the massive constriction and raising of the flood plain and the placement of a high density of tall buildings at the river's edge. The proposed project appears to make the same design mistakes albeit exponentially more tasteful.

Funding of Key City Infrastructure

The Conservancy is aware that the City needs the Lost Canyon Road bridge constructed across the river through the subject property. We are also aware that the City wants an existing, more northerly-located, Metrolink Station moved to the subject project site. The Conservancy understands that a significant-sized mixed use project is necessary to fund these improvements. The question is if so much of the flood plain and uplands need to be eliminated in favor of high density development in order to pay for these infrastructure

improvements. It should be incumbent upon the applicant to adequately demonstrate to both the public and to decision makers via an economic analysis that so much of the Santa Clara River and upland must be consumed by development to fund the proposed bridge, street, and Metrolink (just the northbound platform) infrastructure. Should so much of the river be eliminated without those financial facts being made available to decision makers as part of the CEQA review process? The fact that approximately 25 acres of that development would occur on what is existing City parkland further emphasizes this need.

Maximized, Far-Reaching Development Footprint

As proposed, the project would grade and totally alter every square inch of the property except for the most active main channel area of the Santa Clara River, one minuscule historic cemetery site, and small isolated habitat patch along the Metrolink tracks. This agency's goal is to permanently protect additional habitat and viewshed on the subject property while accommodating the road, bridge, Metrolink Station, and substantial mixed use development. This letter includes specific recommendations on how to adjust the project footprint and accomplish all of these goals.

The proposed project would covert an approximately 100-acre area comprised of active flood plain, old flood plain terrace, and a series of attractive hill systems into one unified raised mega-pad that juts an average of 600 feet into the active river bed. We believe that the DEIR must conclude that the project will result in numerous unavoidable significant adverse ecological impacts. We understand that the City will need to adopt a Statement of Overriding Considerations to approve the project based on the need for the Lost Canyon Road extension and bridge and Metrolink Station. The Conservancy sees no other basis for issuing such a statement given the regional importance of the Santa Clara River as habitat, an inter-mountain ranger wildlife movement corridor, and groundwater recharge area. The only way to mitigate the biological impacts to a less than significant level would be to acquire substantial additional land with a favorable combination of upland and river habitat. That land would need to be relatively near the project site within and along the Santa Clara River.

Affects or Altered Flood Plain on Downstream Habitat

Because the proposed project, and presumably many of its Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) alternatives, will eliminate significant amounts of flood plain capacity, the DEIR must analyze how that loss of capacity could adversely affect downstream habitat and flood protection infrastructure.

DEIR Alternatives

The DEIR must include, and adequately analyze, less damaging feasible alternative projects. These less damaging, feasible alternatives should retain and integrate some of the unique hill systems on the site rather than use them for fill material. We understand that approximately 1.5 million cubic yards of fill are needed to raise the elevation of 90 percent of the project area out of flood hazard zones, however, at least five acres of hill area must be preserved in one feasible development alternative. Otherwise as currently configured, the project would not result in the intact preservation of a single square foot of habitat that is not currently in the 50 year flood plain except for a small patch along the railroad tracks.

Wildlife Corridor Capacity

In some capacity, the Santa Clara River will remain as one of the most important regional wildlife corridors until the end of time. The question is how functional and ecologically rich will that corridor be through the City of Santa Clarita. Downstream from the project site the river is constricted to the maximum extent possible all the way downstream 9.5 miles to Interstate 5. Currently, and even more so after all existing entitled projects along this reach of river are built, there is zero upland habitat refuge for 9.5 miles. As proposed the current project would increase the length of that upland-habitat-free reach to a full ten miles.

Because of this long reach of river without upland habitat, the need to retain upland habitat both within, and connected to, the project site is paramount for baseline multi-species wildlife corridor function. Animals need an upland, or densely vegetated riparian, refuge as a movement staging area while, or before entering, the 9.5-mile-long river gauntlet downstream of State Route 14. The project would eliminate all such existing refugia within the project boundary. The DEIR must include two feasible project alternatives that include at least two three-acre habitat refuges along the river with either existing high density vegetation or substantial topographic cover. Lack of two onsite habitat refugia would constitute an unavoidable significant adverse ecological impact.

The dismantling of a City-owned habitat refuge on the north side of the river to accommodate a combined commercial-educational facility runs completely contrary to these above-addressed conservation biology objectives. That northern habitat refuge is ideal with diverse upland topography and a small riparian woodland tucked into a protected oxbow. Just because it burned recently and has had some homeless activity does not diminish its medium and longterm ecological value. Rangers can solve those problems quickly.

The project would also sever the subject section of the Santa Clara River from the San Gabriel Mountains. The DEIR must address the connectivity of the subject project site to the San Gabriel Mountains via an intact hill system in the southeast project corner. Our staff imparted the need for this habitat connectivity to the applicant in the late fall. Our suggestion was that a habitat linkage between the river and the upland to the south be carved out along the eastern project boundary integrating the proposed park. Lack of a functional habitat linkage between the southeast project corner and the San Gabriel Mountains would constitute an unavoidable significant adverse ecological impact.

Open Space Dedication

We are sure that the applicant and the DEIR will tout how the project is leaving 70-plus acres of river bottom intact. Given that development of those 70-plus acres is economically and politically impossible, that says little about how much the applicants have scaled back the project to protect habitat and viewsheds.

River Habitat Quality

The DEIR may describe the portion of the river proposed for consumption by the development as being dry and not densely vegetated. That portion of the flood plain is particularly wide. Groundwater levels typically are lower in wider reaches. Nonetheless the proposed project footprint would convert many acres of alluvial fan scrub vegetation with widespread scale broom and scattered small cottonwood trees. The ongoing drop in both ground and surface water levels from State Route 14 to Soledad Canyon has resulted in the continued decline of vegetation and habitat quality. It is ironic that two high capacity municipal wells that continue to reduce these water levels sit in the river directly adjacent to the proposed Lost Canyon Road bridge alignment. The DEIR should address whether the proposed project will require water from these wells and whether that increased demand could further erode habitat quality in any section of the river bed.

Recommended Footprint Modifications to Protect Habitat

The project footprint appears to be greatly driven by a desire to reduce the length of the proposed Lost Canyon Road bridge. However it is the filling of the river for the southern bridge abutment that would result in the most significant flood plain habitat loss. The bridge abutment should be pulled back south approximately 400-500 feet to the edge of the active channel scour line easily seen on any aerial photograph. Lost Canyon Road should also be pulled back just south of this active channel boundary too. The round-about intersection could be moved accordingly and the traffic pattern would not change at all.

If expanding the channel width in this location presents some insurmountable flood level hydraulic problems, then the widening should be reduced and commensurately increased upstream of the Lost Canyon Road southern bridge abutment. The City's proposed Golden Valley Road bridge over the river is at least 1,100 feet long so the only obstacle to length is cost. If the applicants say that extra cost makes the project infeasible, the applicant must prove that.

At least one DEIR alternative should be based on a footprint that keeps the entire western hill system both intact and connected to the river via a 10-foot-high by 12-foot-wide (minimum) under-crossing beneath the Lost Canyon Road extension. This would not at all diminish east-west traffic flow through the project site as the road network is currently laid out. The hills system is ecologically rich, provides a great habitat refuge, and would give the development some natural character.

The proposed project would bring a range of development and human disturbances directly up to the core of the river habitat. The presence of numerous ill-advised developments appressed against the core river habitat downstream increases, not lessens, the importance of maintaining upland buffer area within subject property. The wildlife movement gauntlet needs to be kept wider, not reduced. We urge the City to embrace this proven concept of conservation biology.

Please address any questions and send all future project documents to Paul Edelman of our staff at the above address and by phone at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128.

Sincerely,

RONALD P. SCHAFER
Chairperson