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February 25, 2005

Dear Community Leader:

On Thursday, February 24, I testified before the Los Angeles City Planning Commission to state my strong opposition to the Canyon Hills project as proposed by the developer. My opposition is based on the extensive input I have received from people like you and my commitment to preserving as much open space as possible in perpetuity.

For your information, attached is a copy of my remarks, as prepared, for the Los Angeles City Planning Commission.

I cannot thank the community enough for their support and partnership. I have always said the residents of the Foothill community are unique for their involvement and if all neighborhoods were as active, this city would be in a much better place.

If it were possible to oppose any development in Canyon Hills believe me, I would do everything I could to stop any and all development. Unfortunately, I cannot. Just saying no would allow the current developer, or any future developer, to develop 169 large ranchettes that would consume the entire property and could easily be subdivided into smaller lots in the future. This is just too risky and Canyon Hills is too precious to leave its future in the hands of fate.

It has also been suggested that the clustering of RE-40 lots could be another option. This approach may actually protect less open space, consume land on both sides of the Foothill Freeway, require more grading and result in larger, more visible homes. We can do better to save more open space and save it in perpetuity.

I want to eliminate all development on the south side of the Foothill Freeway, except for the proposed equestrian center and I want to cluster a reasonable number of new lots adjacent to existing homes located north and east of the project.

I have been working closely with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and with community members like you and we agree that preserving the area South of the freeway is critical to maintaining the character of the community and protecting the quality of life of its residents. Preserving the Southside is critical to the future of this region.

Thank you again for your continued involvement and thank you to everyone who has fought to preserve the beautiful and unique open space of the Foothill community.

Sincerely,

COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS

CHAIR: AUDITS AND GOVERNMENTAL EFFICIENCY COMMITTEE
VICE CHAIR: AD HOC COMMITTEE ON BUSINESS TAX REFORM
VICE CHAIR: RULES AND ELECTIONS
MEMBER: PERSONNEL, AD HOC RIVER COMMITTEE

Remarks by Los Angeles City Councilmember Wendy Greuel, as prepared, for the Los Angeles City Planning Commission on Thursday, February 24, 2005:

Many communities across Los Angeles are struggling with the issue before all of us today – how do we protect and preserve open space in perpetuity? This is not an easy question given the many demands and competing interests. Families need homes to live in, but they also need parks, trails, green spaces and undeveloped open space to play.

John Muir, California's father of conservation, said it best: "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike."

That is why I have always fought to preserve open space throughout the greater Sunland-Tujunga area.

I fought for the passage of the Scenic Mountain Preservation Plan, which protects the prominent ridgelines of the San Gabriel and Verdugo Mountains from development.

I directed the City of Los Angeles to buy 145 acres of land south of La Tuna Canyon that will be added to the Verdugo Mountain Park protecting that open space from any future development.

In Studio City, I fought to save the Golf & Tennis Recreational area from development because it provides much needed green space in a very dense and urban community.

And, in North Hollywood, I fought to rebuild and expand an existing park giving the children of that neighborhood a place to play and to enjoy the outdoors.

None of these victories, especially the Scenic Preservation Plan, would have been possible without the partnership and participation of the many community leaders here today who have invested countless hours. If there is one thing I am sure of, it is that the people of this community are committed and they care. The community wants to be involved in projects and I welcome this partnership. I will always work with this community and demand that they have a voice in the decision making process.

Last September, I sent a letter to the community leadership of each affected neighborhood seeking their input in evaluating this project and its alternatives. Many serious, legitimate concerns were raised, brought to my attention and thoroughly vetted through careful analyses and open discussion.

Because of the extensive input I have received from my community and because I am committed to preserving as much open space as possible in perpetuity, I OPPOSE the Canyon Hills project as presented by the developer.

There is no doubt in my mind about whether the Verdugo Mountains should be protected. The only question is, what is the best way to accomplish this goal?

Legitimate issues have been raised by my office and constituents regarding the proposed development. I want to outline for you today some of those issues:

FIRST – can we just say NO to any development? Can I simply oppose the zone changes and General Plan Amendments and require the applicant to develop a project that conforms to existing regulations?

If it were that easy, believe me, I would just say no. But, unfortunately, I cannot.

Just saying no would allow the current developer, or any future developer, to develop 169 large ranchettes that could be easily subdivided into smaller lots in the future. I have seen this occur in the valley over the years, even in equestrian areas - look at Chatsworth and Hidden Hills. And, the construction of streets and utility lines throughout the project will only hasten the transition to smaller lots. A “ranchette” subdivision will extend infrastructure to the edges of the Canyon Hills property, making it possible to develop adjoining open space properties.

In my heart I believe that we will doom this open space to a Glendale/Burbank-style development over the next few decades if the 169 lot subdivision is approved. Imagine, nearly 900 acres, privately owned with substantial sized lots today...that could be subdivided into smaller lots in the future? I believe we can NOT take this risk.

I am aware that in this era of term limits, I will not always be here to protect this precious land. So while I am here, I want to do everything I can to ensure that we permanently preserve as much open space as possible.

Canyon Hills is too precious to leave its future in the hands of fate.

SECOND – would the proposed zone changes and General Plan Amendments be precedent setting and open up other parts of the community to development?

Regardless of the outcome of this case, I do not believe that it will be precedent setting.

In speaking with the City Attorney, they have advised that each case stands on its own and will have to go through the required process of community input and legislative action by the City Council. Hillside projects, in particular, vary greatly in their details. Crucial factors like access, availability of utilities, topography and the like can easily justify vastly different treatment of other projects.

I reached my conclusions about this project because of the unique character of the Canyon Hills property. It is enormous, occupying nearly 3 miles on both sides of the Foothill Freeway scenic corridor. This space in particular is adjoining publicly owned open space on the south side and existing development on the north side.

THIRD – is the slope density calculation accurate?

Mr. Bill Eick and Mr. Don Keene sent a letter to the City Planning Commission raising several issues related to the city’s slope-density ordinance and the Planning Department’s interpretation of that ordinance. Because of the issues they raised, I asked the Planning Department to scrutinize and verify the accuracy of the submitted calculations.

FOURTH – are the options of large ranchettes, clustering, or a hybrid of RE-40 clustered lots viable?

After hundreds of meetings and countless conversations there have been many suggestions regarding possible alternatives to the proposed development. The three main options identified are large-lot ranchettes, clustering of RE40 lots and general clustering.

I do not support the large-lot ranchette alternative because it consumes all of the land and creates infrastructure throughout the property, which could support the development of adjoining properties. Large subdivisions or ranchettes can be easily subdivided into smaller lots in the future and in fact, this has already happened throughout the San Fernando Valley.

As I have said, Canyon Hills is too precious to leave its future in the hands of fate.

A second option is the clustering of RE-40 lots which is a hybrid approach that would allow clustering of lots without modifying the General Plan. This approach may actually protect less open space, consume land on both sides of the Foothill Freeway, require more grading and result in larger, more visible homes.

Finally, is the alternative of clustering. The developer is currently proposing a clustered project that would allow development of 280 lots on both the North and South side of the freeway.

We can do better. We can protect more open space and save it in perpetuity.

I want to eliminate all development on the south side of the Foothill Freeway, except for the proposed equestrian center. I want to cluster a reasonable number of new lots adjacent to existing homes located north and east of the project. The number of new lots should be the lowest number that enables us to preserve the entire south side while not neglecting viewshed, trails or design standards.

That is why I have been working so closely with the community and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. We all agree that preserving the Southside is critical to maintaining the character of this community and protecting the quality of life of its residents. Preserving the Southside is critical to the future of this region.

In reaching your [Planning Commission] determination as to whether development should be limited to the north side of the Foothill Freeway, I urge you to consider the following crucial facts:

The development on the south side of the proposed project is close to the Foothill Freeway and La Tuna Canyon Road scenic corridors, and at least half of the south side development is clearly visible from those corridors.

The lots on the south side were designed as RE20 lots. As such, they have larger building pads than the development on the north side, requiring more grading per lot than is needed on the north side.

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy argues that there are important wildlife migration routes on the south side of the freeway, which connect through conservation easements in Shadow Hills to the Big Tujunga Wash.

The development on the south side requires two bridges across a blue line stream, which will affect important riparian habitat.

Elimination of south side development would preserve a significant number of oak trees that would be destroyed by south side development.

By virtue of its proximity to the developed area of La Tuna Canyon, traffic generated by south side development is likely to have a greater per unit impact on La Tuna Canyon residents than north side development.

Again, if I could simply say no, I would do everything I could to stop any and all development of this property. Because the preservation of open space in perpetuity has always been my top priority for the Foothill community, Canyon Hills has been one of the toughest issues I have faced.

I can't thank the community enough for their support and partnership. I have always said the residents of the Foothill community are unique for their involvement. If all neighborhoods were as active as the Foothill community, this city would be in a much better place.

So thank you again to the community.

Thank you to the Commission for what we trust will be your careful consideration of every issue the community has raised.

And thank you to everyone who has fought to preserve the beautiful and unique open space of the Foothill community.