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October 5, 2005

Dear Friends of the Verdugo Mountains:

On Monday, October 3, I testified before the City of Los Angeles Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee to make recommendations regarding the Canyon Hills project in the Verdugo Mountains. My recommendations to the committee were based on the extensive input from community members and my commitment to preserving as much open space in perpetuity as possible.

It is because of your perseverance and passion that I have relentlessly pursued alternatives and revisions to the Canyon Hills project for the last ten months in order to accomplish one goal: to preserve the maximum amount of open space in perpetuity and to allow the smallest number of lots necessary to accomplish that objective.

The issue before the PLUM committee was whether to adopt the Planning Commission's decision to grant a General Plan amendment and zone change which would allow the developer to cluster 230 homes on the north side of the 210 freeway and require dedication of some public land.

The PLUM committee's decision was to grant the General Plan amendment and zone change, to reduce the number of lots on the north side of the freeway to 221, eliminate all development on the south side of the Foothill Freeway (except for the proposed equestrian center), and dedicate all of the land on the south side to the public through the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy which guarantees that the entire south side will remain free from development forever.

The committee's decision enables us to permanently preserve 750 acres of open space and prevent any further development - - that means 85% of the Canyon Hills property will be preserved as open space. Rest assured, your voices were heard by the PLUM Committee and me. You demanded that this precious space be preserved and I believe that this is the best possible way to guarantee that result.

Thank you again for equipping me with the information and support I needed to stand with you to preserve the beautiful and unique open space of the Foothill community.

I have attached a copy of my remarks, as prepared, to the PLUM Committee.

Sincerely,

Remarks by Los Angeles City Councilmember Wendy Greuel as prepared, for the Los Angeles Planning and Land Use Management Committee on Monday, October 3, 2005:

John Muir, California's father of conservation, said: "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."

As policymakers, we struggle to find a balance between the rights of developers to construct more housing to alleviate the city's housing shortage, with an equally important need to build more parks, trails, green spaces and preserve undeveloped open space for future generations.

That is why I have always fought to preserve open space throughout the greater Sunland-Tujunga area, including: the passage of the Scenic Preservation Corridor Plan, the purchases of 145 acres south of La Tuna Canyon and a passive park adjacent to Big Tujunga wash, and I have utilized all of the Prop K money available to my district to acquire open space.

The Canyon Hills project before you today has been one of the most challenging issues my community and I have had to face.

The issue before this Committee is whether to adopt the Planning Commission's decision to grant a General Plan amendment and zone change which allows the developer to cluster 230 homes on the north side of the 210 freeway and requires dedication of some public land.

If I thought saying "no" to the General Plan Amendment and Zone Change would stop the project altogether, I would say "no." Some have argued that the developer would not move forward with the project if I said no to the General Plan amendment and the zone change. All of the evidence has been to the contrary.

Saying "no" is certainly the politically expedient thing for me to do. But, I am very concerned about the consequences for the community.

I am keenly 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. The Verdugo Mountains are too precious to leave its future in the hands of fate.

For the last ten months I have relentlessly pursued alternatives and revisions to the Canyon Hills project as proposed by the developer in order to accomplish one goal:

To preserve the maximum amount of open space in perpetuity and to allow the smallest number of lots necessary to accomplish that objective.

I would like to discuss the history of the Canyon Hills development in order to provide context for my recommendations to the committee.

The Canyon Hills property is simply enormous. The project area covers 887 acres – that’s bigger than New York’s Central Park!

Years before I took office, the developer made a proposal to subdivide the entire property into estate-size lots. At that time, the community expressed concern because the proposal would consume virtually all of the open space along both sides of the Foothill Freeway for a distance of 2-1/2 miles. Instead, the community at that time proposed a clustered development so that the maximum acreage of the beautiful Verdugo Mountains open space could be preserved.

The project went through several iterations, beginning with over 600 lots and ending with the developer’s proposal for 280 lots that went to the City Planning Commission in February.

At that time I testified before the Planning Commission that I opposed the Canyon Hills project for 280 homes north and south of the 210 freeway. I stated that we could do better. We can protect MORE open space and save it in perpetuity.

I specifically stated then, that I wanted to eliminate all development on the south side of the Foothill Freeway - except for a proposed equestrian center – and that I wanted to cluster the smallest number of new lots possible and limit them to the north side only, an area where considerable development already exists. I said then that the number of new lots ought to be the lowest number that enables us to preserve the entire south side while not neglecting viewshed, trails or design standards.

The Planning Commission recommended approval of the zone changes and General Plan amendments needed for a clustered development, and they recommended 230 lots located north of the Foothill Freeway without preserving the entire south side.

The community has said, and I have said: we can do better.

Since the Planning Commission’s decision, the community, led by Bill Eick and Don Keene, has raised legitimate concerns that have helped me to further challenge this project. In particular, they raised serious concerns about how the slope density calculations were used to reach the allowable number of homes that could be built on the entire property.

For the last ten months, I have aggressively and repeatedly challenged the interpretation of the Slope Density Ordinance. I can’t tell you how many times I fought with and personally questioned the planning department and the City Attorney to get answers to the community’s questions. As you have heard today there are several interpretations possible under the current Slope Density Ordinance as to how many “by right” lots are allowed under the law: 45? 87? 109? 169? This is absurd. However, even with these wild variations in number, the City Attorney and Planning staffs are adamant that the ordinance allows for 169 lots on this property. Clearly the ordinance is seriously flawed.

As soon as the City Council returns next week from recess, I will introduce a motion asking the Planning Department and the City Attorney to report back to the PLUM committee with recommendations to eliminate the wide range of possible results for future developments and to immediately implement an Interim Control Ordinance. Unfortunately, that action will not affect the Canyon Hills project. Under the terms of the current ordinance, the City Attorney & Planning staff have said: we are legally required to accept the developer's 169-lot calculation.

Fire access is another one of the community's concerns. I have repeatedly asked the Fire Department for their assurances that they will have sufficient access to protect the people of Sunland Tujunga in the event of a fire. The Los Angeles Fire Department is confident that this project meets its stringent standards for fire access roads.

The community is also concerned that General Plan amendments and zone changes for Canyon Hills will set a dangerous precedent that will result in the development of other hillside properties in the Verdugos. As you heard earlier, the City Attorney advises that zone changes and General Plan amendments are legislative acts and that each case stands on its own.

The community has asked me to oppose the zone changes and General Plan Amendments. But as I've stated, that has consequences.

Opposing the plan outright would allow the current, or any future developer, to build 169 five acre ranches that could easily be subdivided into smaller lots in the future. And, the construction of streets and utility lines throughout the project would extend infrastructure to the edges of the Canyon Hills property, making it significantly easier and more attractive to develop adjoining open space properties.

Let me show you what I mean.

The first map shows the project built out as 5-acre estates. The second map shows the effect that splitting these lots would have over time. You can see that there could easily be 350 lots and there would be virtually nothing left of the site as it exists today.

Without a General Plan amendment we will doom this open space to dense development over the next few decades if the 169 lot subdivision occurs. We can not take this risk.

But most importantly in the case of Canyon Hills, the proposed zone changes and General Plan amendments will actually discourage development of surrounding properties because it concentrates new infrastructure on a condensed part of the site so it will not facilitate development of surrounding properties.

In order to achieve my goal of preserving the greatest amount of open space while limiting the number of lots:

1. I want to eliminate all development on the south side of the Foothill Freeway, except for the proposed equestrian center. If we do this, we would preserve the most visible part of the site, a wildlife corridor, and we would connect the Canyon Hills open space to other publicly owned spaces to the west and south.
2. I want to cluster the smallest number of new lots adjacent to existing homes located north and east of the project.
3. I want to preserve more than 750 acres – that's over 600 football fields.
4. I want to make sure that the Prominent Ridgelines identified in the Scenic Corridor Plan are protected.

Having said that, here are my specific recommendations to the committee:

- I want the developer to dedicate Development Area "B" on the south side of the Foothill Freeway to the public through the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy; this would guarantee the entire south side remains free from development...forever.
- I want the developer to consider open space within Development Area "A" on the north side of the freeway to be encumbered by a conservation easement in favor of the public;
- I want to eliminate at least nine lots that have the greatest impact on viewshed corridors and use stringent design standards to minimize the visibility of all the homes.

I have asked the developer to accept these recommendations, and my support is contingent upon their acceptance of them.

The Planning Commission's recommendations did not go far enough in meeting our goals of securing the entire south side from development and preserving the greatest amount of open space possible.

Adoption of my recommendations will enable us to permanently preserve 750 acres of open space and prevent any further development - - that means 85% of the Canyon Hills property will be preserved as open space. The community demanded that this precious space be preserved and I believe that this is the best possible way to guarantee that result.

The future will look very much like the 3rd map. The dark green areas show the land that would be dedicated to the public. The apple-green areas would be covered by a conservation easement, assuring that they will never be developed. And, the pale green area is the part of the south side that the Planning

Commission left unprotected, that will now be protected from development forever.

Again, if I could simply say no, I would do everything in my power to stop any and all development of this property. But because the preservation of open space in perpetuity has always been my top priority for the Foothill Community, we must take these steps to preserve this land now.

I can't thank the community enough for being strong advocates and voice for saving our Verdugo Mountains. I have always said the residents of the Foothill community are unique for their activism. 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 Committee 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.