

Rancho Estates MHP Fire Road Improvements Project: Talking Points

The Devereux Creek corridor in this area is critical habitat for migratory and resident birds. The proposed road and vegetation clearances would degrade on-site and adjacent bird and wildlife habitat, including the important migratory bird “stopover site” at the end of Coronado Drive. This is a designated Audubon birding hotspot known as the “Coronado Seep”. This area is especially valuable for fall migrants from late July to early October.

The DEIR’s analysis of impacts on bird and wildlife lists only 28 bird species that might be affected by the project. The DEIR is inadequate in its analysis of bird species. Audubon has gathered documented observations of 114 bird species within the project area, including 44 migrants and 54 breeding species. These data were collected by many birders who regularly visit this site. Lists for other vertebrates are also inadequate. For example, brush rabbits are common in the project area and ringneck snakes are often observed.

I support Alternative 2. Alternative 2 achieves the goal of fire safety without the environmental impacts of the proposed project. In this alternative, an extension of Sea Gull Drive provides a different location for the fire access road and fire line. The new fire access road would be gated to prevent automobile and foot traffic between the mobile home park and the adjacent neighborhood. The gate would only be opened for emergency access. The DEIR appropriately describes Alternative 2 as the Environmentally Superior Alternative. Alternative 2 would avoid all the damage to the streamside habitat. Because a much less environmentally-damaging alternative is available, the City must support Alternative 2 to avoid Class I environmental impacts and conflicts with City and Coastal Act policies. The Sea Gull Drive extension requires removal of two mobile homes and relocation of the residents displaced by the removal. I support Alternative 2 with the expectation that the City of Goleta and park owners would work together to relocate the displaced residents with minimal disruption to those residents, and that the City and park owners will reimburse all relocation costs incurred by those residents.

The proposed project violates Goleta’s carefully-crafted General Plan. General Plan policy CE 2.2 requires a minimum 100-foot buffer outward from the tops of stream banks. This is the streamside protection area, or SPA. This buffer is required unless a project is infeasible without the reduction and the resulting reduction has insignificant environmental impacts. Even if conditions for exceptions are met, the SPA cannot be reduced to less than 25 feet. However, in this case, it is clear there is a feasible alternative, Alternative 2. In addition, the proposed project with reduced buffers will have significant environmental impacts. The proposed project will reduce riparian buffers to as low as 6 feet, violating even the minimum requirements of CE 2.2, resulting in an unmitigatable Class I impact to SPAs.

The current trail adjacent to Devereux Creek from Coronado Drive to the southern end of the mobile home park is heavily used by birders, walkers, joggers, and bicyclists. Thus the trail is a valuable public amenity for the community. Most users and neighbors would prefer that the trail stays in its current configuration. The proposed all weather fire road, and associated water pipeline and wall, would replace this trail and destroy the vegetation on the north side of Devereux Creek.

The DEIR is inadequate in that it does not include the impacts of the project to Recreation. I recommend that the DEIR be recirculated to account for impacts to Recreation and mitigation measures that should be implemented. Large numbers of birders from throughout the state visit the project area, especially the Coronado Seep, from mid-summer through fall. This is the most visited birding spot in the county in some years. The impacts to this form of recreation, the loss of Recreation, remedies and mitigations leading to more prudent management of the site are missing.

The project proposes to remove native trees in this riparian corridor, including five arroyo willows, one western sycamore, and four live oaks. The DEIR recognizes these trees are important as habitat, for shading, and as filters for contaminants. Although the DEIR states that this tree removal would constitute a mitigatable Class II impact, mitigation plantings cannot occur in the road corridor, owing to road clearance requirements. As a consequence, the project would destroy native riparian vegetation without appropriate on-site mitigation, constituting a Class I, unmitigable impact.

The DEIR and associated Biological Reports (Appendices B and C) recognize that the project would violate many California Coastal Code and Goleta General Plan/CULP provisions. These include polices on Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHAs, including raptor and monarch butterfly habitat) and their required buffers, Streamside Protection Areas (SPAs), and wetland buffers. The Biological Reports recognize that this project violates many of the City's environmental policies. However, the DEIR is inadequate because it argues that many of the project impacts could be mitigated. This assertion contradicts the environmental review documents which clearly state that violation of the underlying policies protecting environmental resources could not be mitigated (therefore resulting in Class I impacts).

The proposed fire road is in the Coastal Zone, conflicting with Coastal Act 30240(a), which states that Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area, ESHA, shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values; Coastal Act 30240 (b), which states that development adjacent to ESHAs must be situated and designed to prevent impacts to ESHAs, and Coastal Act 30231, which protects the biological productivity and quality of coastal waters, including encouraging riparian habitat.

Due to the construction and maintenance of the 20-foot wide road, and 10 foot clearances on both sides (within 6 feet of stream banks), the disruption to bird breeding, feeding, and roosting habitat would persist for the life of the project, that is, indefinitely.

The numbering of impacts and mitigations in the Biological Report (Appendix B) do not match the numbering in the DEIR, which is confusing and misleading. The Biological Report performed a considered analysis of the environmental impacts of the fire safety plan, which largely was not followed in the DEIR. The DEIR made many unsubstantiated conclusions regarding the class of environmental impacts and the appropriateness of mitigations. We refer the City to the DEIR's Appendices B and C for a reasonable environmental impact analysis.

The City erred in making the fire safety plan a condition for approval of the mobile home park condominium conversion years ago. At that time the environmental impacts of the fire safety plan were unknown. Therefore, the attachment of these conditions as a Development Agreement (DA) did not trigger a revised or supplemental EIR which would have allowed the environmental impacts of the entire project to be evaluated. The impacts and mitigations for the project with conditions were not examined until long after the conversion was approved, inappropriately limiting the options of future approval bodies.

The City is allowing a private operator to build and maintain infrastructure on City-owned public lands, while degrading an important community amenity.

Points compiled by the Santa Barbara Audubon Society Conservation Committee
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