

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

RAMIREZ CANYON PARK
5750 RAMIREZ CANYON ROAD
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA 90265
PHONE (310) 589-3200
FAX (310) 589-3207



August 4, 2010

Los Angeles City Council
200 North Spring Street
Los Angeles, California 90012

Support for the Proposed Baseline Hillside Ordinance

Honorable Councilmembers:

For years, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) and a broad range of citizens have encouraged the City of Los Angeles to enact responsible policies governing hillside development. The Department of City Planning has concluded a thorough and exemplary public participation process, resulting in the proposed Baseline Hillside Ordinance before you today. The ordinance would protect hillside areas from the most egregious over-sized development in the same way that the Baseline Mansionization Ordinance has in the flats. In its deliberations, the City Planning Commission removed several key provisions related to grading. The Conservancy urges you to support passage of the ordinance and further encourages your consideration of Councilmember Koretz's motion to restore some of these provisions.

The ordinance would reduce the intensity of new development in hillside areas, preserving the character of existing neighborhoods and the integrity of the natural terrain. Too many projects have been permitted that dramatically alter native landforms, with severe geological, hydrological, biological, and aesthetic consequences. The proposed Baseline Hillside Ordinance provides reasonable limits on development and enhances the Conservancy's ability to protect our natural resources, while still allowing for ample economic use of private property. The ordinance strikes a the appropriate balance between these competing interests.

Throughout the eastern Santa Monica Mountains in recent years, large houses have been squeezed into ever-smaller lots in existing neighborhoods. Excess development intensity compromises this wildlife movement, which is essential to maintaining genetic diversity in large public parks, such as Griffith Park. Specifically, oversized houses consume a large percentage of the lot and leave side yards that are too narrow to facilitate wildlife movement. As new houses tear the web of passageways, the cumulative impact on wildlife populations is significant.

Without this ordinance, unlimited grading has been allowed to literally reshape the hillsides. Large projects generally include complex retaining wall configurations that leave the site impassable to wildlife. Originally, the proposed ordinance would have restricted the total amount of grading allowed without a variance. Unfortunately, the revised ordinance from the City Planning Commission removed many of these protections by exempting nearly all grading associated with the construction of a house from the total grading cap allowed by-right.

The motion by Councilmember Koretz would restore three key provisions to improve the effectiveness of the ordinance:

- A portion (75 percent) of exempted cut and fill would be counted toward the overall grading cap. This preserves the original intention of the ordinance to lower the total amount of grading occurring in the hills and its associated impacts.
- A 10 percent limit on the Zoning Administrator's determination authority would prohibit the inappropriate use of the variance process to circumvent the ordinance.
- Reinstating the ban on grading on extreme slopes, or at least requiring the most stringent level of geotechnical analysis, would ensure that construction on these inherently dangerous lots is safe and protects neighbors from speculative building on "junk" lots.

The Councilmember's amendment would permit enough grading for developers to create a feasible building pad that compliments the terrain.

Overall, this ordinance proposes reasonable limits on hillside development. The City would be wise to adopt the new rules to preserve one of its defining features. The Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Plan calls for letting the land dictate the use instead of imposing human uses on the land. The proposed ordinance follows the spirit of the Plan by encouraging houses to fit the terrain. The Conservancy supports the City in its efforts to protect the character and integrity of its hills.

Los Angeles City Council
Baseline Hillside Ordinance
August 4, 2010
Page 3

If you have any questions, I can be reached by phone at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Edelman', written in a cursive style.

PAUL EDELMAN
Deputy Director
Natural Resources and Planning

cc: Erick Lopez, Los Angeles Department of City Planning