

Andora Avenue Update

September 5, 2016

The Andora Avenue residential development project will be very active in September and October 2016 pursuing entitlement approvals for 33 new homes at the southern end of Andora Avenue (southwest of Lassen/Valley Circle) in Chatsworth (in the City of Los Angeles). This project is fairly unchanged from the proposal made in the draft environmental impact report and earlier proposals shown to the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council. To fit these lots into this very hilly area, the developer has proposed numerous approaches that are incompatible with stated intentions of City laws. **The City has failed to review or follow stated intentions of their various development ordinances and land use policies. SSMPA will continue to remind the City of their stated policies.**

Most long-term local residents (and many newer ones) have grown attached to the rugged sandstone boulders and jagged natural hillsides on the west side of Chatsworth. These rough hills are filled with hiking trails that long have been used by outdoor enthusiasts and wildlife. These naturally irregular slopes show a significantly different profile from the low hills of the Valley in the north, where thousands of acres have been re-contoured into the rounded graded pads of Porter Ranch. Deerlake Ranch is now grading the next project in the north part of the Valley to the west, between Porter Ranch and Indian Springs for 314 more homes.

On the evening of September 7, the project will appear seeking approval from Chatsworth Neighborhood Council. On September 20, it is scheduled with City Planning for approval of the project and the Tract Map. And on October 27, a tentative date, an additional hearing is scheduled. SSMPA has posted the **hearing notice** at <http://bit.ly/2c33zjF>

SSMPA considers the following issues significant and indicative of bending all rules to fit the project into about 30 flatter acres of the 91 acre parcel:

Grading – Total grading is proposed at 380,000 cubic yards for the 33 homes. The City was concerned about hillside grading and adopted a Baseline Hillside Ordinance in 2011 that requires projects to match local land contours and limit grading. Planners not involved with the project referred us to this Ordinance, noting it should limit the grading. The Ordinance notes grading allowances of approximately 5000 cubic yards per home (165,000 cubic yards). But the developer proposes that grading before the land designation changes to “residential” development, for more than double the Ordinance allows, will not be prohibited by the Ordinance. Therefore they are exempt from this part of the Ordinance. The City planner for the project has indicated the developer may grade in this manner. Also interesting is that a new update to the Baseline Hillside Ordinance has just been released that limits grading again, indicating the prior Ordinance was not as effective as they wanted. Is part of the present rush for approval of the Andora project to avoid the new version of the Baseline Hillside Ordinance?

Wildlife Corridor – The Chatsworth Community Plan sets development standards in the community. It provides for a review to ensure connectivity from the Chatsworth Nature Preserve to the surrounding areas, and is quoted below.

“To further define the link between the Chatsworth Reservoir, wildlife corridors, and the community by identifying natural wildlife habitats, migration paths, and archaeological/paleontological sites and planning for their preservation;

To develop and maintain equestrian trails, linkages, and bicycle routes within the Community;”

Wildlife Corridors and Trails: Maps of local open space show the proposed Andora Estates land as a single parcel that provides connectivity between the Chatsworth Nature Preserve and the 670 acre Santa Susana Pass State Historic Park to the north. Review of Wildlife Corridors using simple internet searches indicates that a standard regional wildlife corridor is 500 meters, or about 1664 feet. The entire Andora project is about 1664 feet wide as it passes through the canyon that is the critical wildlife corridor. The project proposes a non-residential corridor width of about 424 feet, compared to the standard of about 1664 feet. Furthermore, much of that 424 feet is significantly impaired by steep topography. Unfortunately, the provided area will be very impacted by light from the new homes, with further impacts from mandatory vegetation removal for fire protection, from residents’ pets, and this area will no longer look like a migration path to wildlife in the Nature Preserve seeking a migration path. Additionally, the narrow swath allowed by the project’s design is significantly impacted due to hills and difficult slopes.

In this time when

- the Liberty Canyon wildlife crossing at the Ventura Freeway, has gained traction to provide larger mammals an access route over the Freeway into the Simi Hills that are on the westerly side of the San Fernando Valley, and
- the Rim of the Valley proposal has made its way to Washington DC to further preserve open space around the Valley and surrounding areas,

to cut off the effective use of the Andora area for Wildlife is an absolute shame.

The wildlife crossing in that area provides a significant Regional improvement for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, to link that area to the Los Padres Forest to the North. However, with this design, Chatsworth and the City of Los Angeles, fails to consider a viable wildlife access route for wildlife if this narrow and difficult route is approved. We question if the City actually PLANS – they have already developed to the edge of the City, except for this parcel. Rather than utilize language that has been in the Community Plan since the early 1970’s to provide for a sure way to retain a usable and effective linkage in this area, through an effective choice affecting a single parcel, the City sends responsibility for a wildlife to Ventura County. The City of Los Angeles cannot rely on Ventura County to do what the City has ignored based on the self-serving environmental analysis in the Final Environmental Impact Report that passes responsibility to Ventura for a viable wildlife corridor.

Trails – The developer initially stated to the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council Committee for Land Use that all trails would be developed to City Standards (generally a 12-foot wide trail with rails); but later limited trail development to only areas within the development footprint. The

more accessible trails, which have long been used between the Chatsworth Lake Manor Area and the State Park, pass near the bottom of the canyon and will be filled with homes under the development proposal. Although the southerly part of the canyon will not be developed, grading on the site will remove the primary trail that has reasonable slopes, leaving the community and wildlife only with extremely steep, unimproved trails (one to two foot wide dirt tracks) in the southwest part of the project that are very difficult to walk on, and impassible for many equestrians. A trail shown on the tract map that goes around the community is generally limited to residents. The neighborhood council requested trail access for all the surrounding homes, but that is not part of the proposal.

Compatibility with nearby homes –The Roy Rogers residential development on Andora Avenue is just north of the proposed Andora Estates. The homes in the Rogers development have varied lot sides, but generally are 17,000 square feet and up, with the former Roy Rogers home being the largest lot at approximately four acres. These homes are zoned RA, and the homes are built on pads among mature oak trees that have created a beautiful neighborhood. This part of Chatsworth has been referred to as the estate area of Chatsworth. The new project states that it enhances the neighborhood and is compatible in its development, but we dispute that opinion, due to much smaller usable lot sizes and much larger homes, which will eliminate the “country” feeling in this development.

Equestrian lots – In general, the City requires horses to be 75 feet from a “habitable room” of a house. Equestrian zoned lots are called “K” overlays and allow horses to be 35 feet from a habitable room. In our Council District, these lots are typically only allowed when the lot is 20,000 square feet, because it is difficult to fit horses and home on a lot with side yards, front yards, and appropriate equine distances to neighbors. The development has conservation easements on a large portion of many lots in the project. The stated and legal lot sizes are generally 20,000 or 40,000 square feet, but conservation easements that eliminate the homeowners’ use of that part of the lot bring the usable portion of the lot to as little as 11,000 square feet on several lots. Such small usable lot sizes will effectively prohibit horse keeping on these proposed “K” overlay, horse keeping lots. The developer has proposed a few lots that have an ability to have horses based on a larger usable lot. The local zoning guidelines have technically been complied with but the result is a horse keeping eligible, large lot subdivision, that does not have usable large lots, and cannot allow horse keeping on the great majority of the lots.

Conservation easements – The private lots have significant conservation easements that raise the developer’s statistics for open space preservation, while providing lip service to the Community plan for 20,000 or 40,000 square foot lots in this area, since the homeowners are prohibited from using the conservation portion of the lot. Given the proposed larger homes and the small lot sizes that represent usable space for the homeowner, homeowners will be required by their insurance policies to remove vegetation on significant portions of the “conservation” land, which will reduce the effectiveness of those portions of the private land conservation easements and natural appearances for wildlife migration routes.

Dark Skies – Much of western Chatsworth north of Plummer and west of Topanga Canyon, has a dark appearance at night. Residents enjoy the “country” feeling and it enhances our connection with the natural areas. The intensity of this development and related lights will significantly impact the low light, if the project is built as proposed. This number of homes in this compressed area cannot be mitigated by a lighting provision in a project approval letter.

Retaining walls – Retaining walls are proposed in this development, although generally not allowed under the Baseline Hillside Ordinance. (It seems a retaining wall would indicate a lack of compliance with development that matches contours, doesn't it?) The retaining walls are even significantly in excess of allowed height for retaining walls (see hearing notice).

Findings and Statements of Overriding Considerations are part of the project's final approval. Findings generally must show there is a significant problem that cannot be solved, and that the action requested has been previously approved in the area. We are not aware of other subdivisions in hillsides that have resorted to retaining walls that also escape the provisions of the community plan to provide a viable wildlife solution and equestrian trails. We are not aware of other developments that have used equine keeping designations that have eliminated equine keeping capability by the design of the project. We remain concerned by the devastating effect of the huge grading project and the related effects on this area. We encourage concerned stakeholders to express your concerns to City Planning (see contacts on the hearing notice).

~Teena Takata