

## **Chatsworth Nature Preserve Remediation Plan**

### **July 24, 2013**

Attached is the “remediation” plan to remove silt from the ecology pond at the Chatsworth Nature Preserve that was presented at a meeting at Councilmember Englander’s office in Chatsworth on July 24, 2013.

This “remediation” was presented by a DWP team of three people on July 24, 2013, who initially explained this project would start in October, 2013, and should be completed "quickly". Approximately 30-35 area residents attended the meeting, including members of SSMPA, FPSSM, the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council, and West Hills Neighborhood Council.

The DWP presentation was fairly brief and the major points are summarized in this paragraph. Yes, the gray area on the attached graphic is their proposal for the after-silt-removal pond size. This was represented as adequate for Canadian Geese and other migratory birds that visit the area, particularly in winter months. The DWP presenter also noted that the bull rushes, willows and other vegetation near the pond needed to be removed as it provides areas where mosquitoes can breed. They advised that there would be replanting, but commented that certain species such as willows that presently are there, will not do well due to clay under top soil. Comments were also made that the pond has been negatively impacted, from effects after the last local fire that have caused larger amounts of silt run-off into the pond, especially from the Chatsworth Oaks Park area. They mentioned adding k-rails to drainage channels due to degrading asphalt courses for water runoff, which is especially prevalent from the Summit Ridge Development along Plummer. DWP indicated the quantity of water required to maintain water in the pond was excessive in this time of scarce water resources. Additional siphon holes (but not available pond water) are to be added as indicated along the bottom edge of the (current) pond, to provide additional water sources for fire helicopters during wildfires. The date proposed to start the project is October, 2013.

Community members at the meeting clearly were outraged, but civil. They advised variously they had thought the meeting was about the mitigation project pending for BFI, or for silt removal in the pond. Many attendees commented that the pond was critical for local wildlife and the proposed changes would have a devastating effect on the wildlife.

The community also expressed grave concerns about management practices in Chatsworth Nature Preserve. Specific items commented on were the use of poison pellets to kill ground squirrels, with its related systemic effect to reduce raptor populations and small predators that feed on dead small mammals. Also pointed out was that some portion of their problems with runoff related to the use of non permeable surfaces such as the k-rail, which does not allow natural absorption as water travels.

The meeting invitation from Semee Park of the CD-12 Council Office, and presentation graphic (attached) was for the “Chatsworth Reservoir” and for the “Detention Pond”. Council Office staff and DWP were reminded by the attendees that the area had been designated the Chatsworth Nature Preserve, with much fanfare and pride by the Council Office approximately 10 years ago. Council Office staff indicated they were, indeed, aware that the community valued the resource and they were supportive, and remain supportive of the correct name, the Chatsworth Nature Preserve. Comment was also made by audience members that the name Chatsworth Nature Preserve was more than a mere name, that there was, and remains, responsibility to manage the property as a nature preserve.

The audience further commented that much of the push to eliminate the ecology pond as a community water resource has occurred after the helicopter pads for emergency water loading were implemented in the south part of the Nature Preserve. Displeasure was expressed that the documents for public review of those helicopter pads did not indicate there then would be related effect to eliminate water from the ecology pond. This should have been disclosed as a material disclosure in those documents.

Several comments were made about the present management practices of the property that are not consistent with good management practices for open space. Mowing down young oak trees under the failing mature, heritage trees on the property prevents the new generation of trees from maturing. Use of rodenticides changes the natural balance of animals and is devastating to the birds of prey and larger prey mammals that feed on the poisoned small mammals. Increasing channelization and less permeable surfaces removes the ability of water to move naturally in the area. Removal of downed trees removes an important resource to improve soil and support the next generation of trees and other plants.

Appropriate considerations of environmental effects of the proposed plan were demanded by various audience members. Specific requests made included biological surveys at multiple intervals during an entire year, preparation of an MND for the project, preparation of an EIR for the project. Multiple comments were made that the proposed reduction in pond size and related removal of the natural vegetation will have a devastating effect on the pond life and kill many animals, and will almost entirely remove the ability of Canadian Geese and other migratory birds to use the ecology pond for food, recovery, and shelter.

DWP was questioned as to why bulrushes, willows, and related wetland plants could remain at the Sepulveda Dam floodplain, but had to be eliminated here, but they had no answer. DWP made statements that sedimentation running down the western drainages, has had a significant effect to fill the Ecology Pond with mud since the last major Chatsworth fire. It was mentioned that those sediments would not be moving, if it weren't for the fact DWP crews have systematically killed virtually ALL the vegetation that would hold sediments back in the drainages into the Pond, as they restructured huge areas near the pond since that last fire.

Questions were made about how this project related to the wetland restoration project BFI (Browning Ferris Industries, operator of the landfill in Granada Hills) is supposed to be working on in the Chatsworth Nature Preserve, about ¼ of a mile south of the ecology pond. The Council office indicated that topic was not available for consideration or review, and could not be discussed in conjunction with this project at this meeting.

DWP was questioned on the end use proposed for the property; was it commercial/residential development? Or what? Council office staff indicated DWP staff at the meeting could not answer that question. The community requested access to higher level DWP staff that could answer that question.

Long term Chatsworth community members indicated how they treasured the wildlife in the Chatsworth Nature Preserve, and noted this area is an integral part of our history and culture. They reminded DWP staff and the Council office staff we have been told that as development projects need to spend mitigation dollars, we have been presented a plan through Councilmember Englander that City Recreation and Parks would gradually be provided funding for acquisitions in this area, over and above the BFI funds that were already earmarked. We were told that over time the area would be purchased and managed by City Recreation and Parks through use of those mitigation funds.

Toward the end of the meeting, the approach by DWP seemed to change slightly from the initial plan to be implemented this October. An audience member commented on some aspect of the plan, and was quickly corrected by staff to indicate this was only a proposal.

It is hoped there will be some action by DWP to improve management of this area, consistent with specific issues identified by community members at the meeting, and after further evaluation, they will return to meet with the community to present a more sensitive plan supportive of wildlife and the Chatsworth Nature Preserve.

The section below shows steps some community members believe would provide the most effective steps to improve the management of the Chatsworth Nature Preserve and to provide valid information to make an informed decision on the repairs that should be done to the ecology pond.

## **Steps DWP should take to Improve the Chatsworth Nature Preserve**

**SSMPA vigorously advocates preservation and protection of the Chatsworth Nature Preserve. Preserving the integrity of this Nature Preserve requires improvements to current and planned practices, and SSMPA respectfully requests that DWP take the following actions:**

1. Disclose and coordinate the proposed remedial action project with the federal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Include Fish and Wildlife suggestions for improved management of key areas of the Chatsworth Nature Preserve mentioned as problematic in this meeting summary.
2. DWP should immediately disclose this proposed project to community members and organizations that have demonstrated an interest in wildlife and open space in this area, as part of an environmental review. Such groups may include, but should not be limited to, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, local Native Americans, management of the federal Rim of the Valley Corridor Study, local National Parks managers, and the Angeles District of California State Parks.
3. Include a study of how a viable wildlife habitat, which includes use of the Chatsworth Nature Preserve as a wildlife corridor between the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills can best be implemented in the environmental decision-making process for the Chatsworth Nature Preserve. Multiple Planning agencies have identified the Chatsworth Nature Preserve as a very significant link in the open space lands necessary to maintain the critical wildlife habitat linkages between the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, the Los Padres National Forest and the Angeles Forest. The link is a key local goal outlined in the SEAs under consideration by Los Angeles County's General Plan revision. The in-progress purchase of over 300 acres (formerly known as the Las Lomas project) of key habitat for this linkage by the City of Santa Clarita near the 405 freeway is an important component of the regional link.
4. Conduct a biological study covering an entire year, to incorporate a comprehensive view of the various seasons and migratory cycles. Include animals, birds and flora in the study, since reviews in multiple seasons can optimize discovery of rare and endangered species. Disclose species found during the study that warrant further concern. Include the study in an MND that

is widely circulated to groups that are interested in open space issues (see #2 above, plus those in attendance at the July 24 meeting), and usual notice boundaries 500 feet from the project. Circulate the scoping checklist for the MND to the same parties, and provide customary comment periods (or longer) on both. Consider an EIR based on those studies, if it is warranted. After appropriate consideration of alternatives and related effects, continue with the decision making process for remediation of the Ecology Pond.

5. Improve DWP's approach to open space management by working with local experts to align management of the Chatsworth Nature Preserve more closely with other open space management practices in the Los Angeles/Thousand Oaks/Malibu area. Experts include, but are not limited to, resource managers and biologists from California State Parks, the National Park Service and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. This should occur within a month.
6. Meet with the local community on a defined schedule over the next five years, to update them on revisions to DWP management practices and progress in managing a "nature preserve". Include education about pond biology and discussion of BMP's (best management practices) considered, implemented, as well as management practices deemed not suitable for the Chatsworth Nature Preserve and why. Use of California State BMP's was specifically suggested to the primary DWP presenter after the meeting.
7. Do not disturb native vegetation that supports the entire wetland/marsh environment surrounding the ecology pond, that helps establish it as a wetland. Wetlands, even outside Nature Preserves, are recognized as rare resources and generally protected. However, as part of BMP's, eliminate nuisance water-stealing vegetation such as tamarisk that has been allowed to grow in the ecology pond area.
8. Bring DWP senior management to meet with local community members, who are able to describe mid-term goals and long term goals the DWP has for the Nature Preserve. Combine this meeting with additional disclosure on the status of the BFI mitigation project (which was also requested at the meeting). Continue these top-level meetings periodically to help community members understand DWP goals and any updates to these goals.