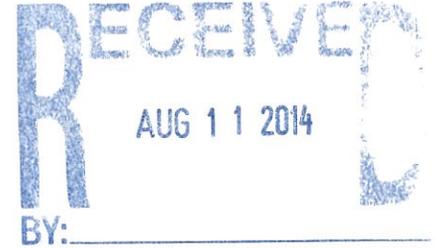




City of Montebello

August 6, 2014

Ms. Emma Howard
Regional Planner, Community Studies North
Room 1354
LA County Department of Regional Planning
320 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012



**Re: APN 5271-001-030, 047, 048, 049; APN 5271-020-028,029, 030, 072, 073, 074 and 075:
Comment to Draft 5 Significant Ecological Areas Ordinance released March 25, 2014 and
Request of Boundary Change to Eliminate Site from Puente Hills Significant Ecological Areas
(SEA) Map**

Dear Ms. Howard,

The City of Montebello wishes to comment on the 5th draft of the Significant Ecological Areas (SEA) Ordinance proposed by the County of Los Angeles Regional Planning Department. The City requests that it be engaged by the County in a more collaborative manner. Although this is a County wide effort, Montebello as an incorporated City, is potentially impacted by these proposed program changes.

One of the proposed Puente Hills SEA land areas, a 488 acre site referred to as the Montebello Hills Specific Plan (MHSP) property, as described above, lies within the incorporated area of the City of Montebello. Based on the existing General Plan land use designations, up to 3,946 residential dwelling units could be developed within the project site. However, the property is currently the subject of General Plan Amendment 3-07, Zone Change 3-07, Specific Plan 1-07 and Tentative Tract Map 74020, which proposes 1,200 dwelling units on 174 acres and 314 acres of permanent open space. The City completed its first Draft EIR in 2009 and a Recirculated Draft EIR is anticipated to be released in the summer of 2014.

The MHSP property received a Biological Opinion in April 2009 from the US Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service authorizing the development of 1,200 residential units, a neighborhood park, recreation center, multi-use trail system and associated infrastructure. In conjunction with the project proposal, approximately 314 acres will be preserved in permanent open space with approximately 260.6 acres reserved for the creation and long term management of the Montebello Hills Habitat Reserve.

The Recommendation Spreadsheet, prepared as an attachment to the Regional County Planning Commission Staff Report dated July 24, 2014, indicates that this land area was mapped for inclusion

into the SEA based on “incorporated city input”. The City of Montebello has not indicated to the County of Los Angeles a desire to include the area within the SEA boundary. In fact, as the City is currently processing the proposed Specific Plan, Zone Change, General Plan Amendment and Vesting Tentative Tract Map on the property, we are writing to request the elimination of the Montebello Hills Specific Plan property from within the Puente Hills SEA Map.

The MHSP property is located in an urbanized area west of the Whittier Narrows and Whittier Dam; south of the Shops at Montebello, Montebello Town Center and the Costco site; and north of the existing La Merced Neighborhood. Since the early 1900s, the MHSP property has been an active oil field. The highly disturbed area has been modified for oil and gas production activities over the last 96 years or so. At present, all portions of the field are being accessed as part of the ongoing operations. Approximately 132.7 acres of roads and pads have been created at the site over the past 96 years. These roads and pads are used on a regular basis for drilling and production operations. Development of the site will facilitate public access to the site for the first time, the development of over 16 acres of parks and recreation, and the creation and preservation of the 260.6 acre habitat reserve, as described above.

The MHSP was designed to incorporate Smart Growth strategies, and anticipated the approval of the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB375). The site is considered by Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) to be an infill site, and as such meets many of the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) Guiding Policies and Goals.

By the reclamation of this industrial brown field, the MHSP project will assist the City of Montebello in meeting their regional housing needs. SCAG has projected that an additional 1,066 units are needed to fulfill future housing needs in the City of Montebello. The MHSP, as proposed, will maximize the use of this in fill land resource in order to assure the availability of a wide variety of energy efficient, market rate housing.

The MHSP is positioned along Montebello Bus Lines’ major local service, Line 20, which runs at high frequencies adjacent to the MHSP area and is also within walking distance of the Taylor Ranch Express (Express 341) to downtown Los Angeles.

As proposed to the City of Montebello, and federally permitted, the MHSP balances development and habitat preservation, meeting federal, state and regional goals. Therefore, the inclusion of the MHSP area within the Puente Hills SEA is unnecessary.

Specific Comments on the Draft 5 SEA Ordinance

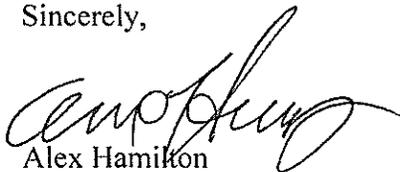
1. The Puente Hills SEA description states that other “local jurisdictions have also been included within the SEA in order to delineate the boundaries of functioning habitat units.” The Ordinance and the SEA description should make it clear that it does not apply to areas within the jurisdiction of a city. The MHSP area is within the jurisdiction of the City of Montebello and is not within the County’s jurisdiction. The ordinance should also clarify that where a project is within an incorporated City, the County will not apply the SEA ordinance for any required County permits solely related to connections to County facilities. The MHSP property is located within the incorporated City of Montebello, and therefore, the SEA

ordinance does not apply. To ensure there is no confusion in the future about the applicability of the SEA, we hereby request that the MHSP be excluded from the SEA.

2. The ordinance is based on out-of-date information. For example, the Puente Hills SEA description from Technical Appendix E does not reference numerous more recent biological information and CEQA and NEPA environmental documents. One example is the City of Montebello 2009 DEIR for the MHSP. Other examples include the Tehachapi Renewable Transmission Project (TRTP) EIR/EIS and the Discovery Center EIR. By relying on outdated information, the Ordinance does not meet CEQA's informational purposes.
3. The Puente Hills SEA description treats different areas inconsistently. For example, under "General Boundary and Resources Description," third paragraph, it states that it is "intended that the SEA encompass only natural areas of the basin and portions of the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo." Further, "manicured areas of the County Recreation Area on the east side of Rio Hondo are not included." As explained above, the MHSP area has been operated as an oil field for almost 100 years and is substantially disturbed. The Ordinance and the underlying support information in the Draft General Plan should be revised to clarify that it does not encompass the oil field.
4. In the Puente Hills SEA "Critical Analysis of the Puente Hills SEA" the County states that the population of the gnatcatcher at the Montebello Hills "is probably one of the largest single populations in the U.S." This statement is misleading as it uses a colloquial definition of the word "population" to describe a complex scientific term used to describe and evaluate groups of individuals. In population ecology a "population" is defined by specific variables that describe the dynamics of birth rates, death rates, immigration, and emigration. Under these more precise terms the Montebello Hills supports a "deme" or regionally defined aggregation of individuals. The Montebello Hills would be considered a more average-sized deme or subpopulation for the gnatcatcher across this species range. Whereas, the Montebello Hills provides a regionally important gnatcatcher resource in this portion of Los Angeles County, there are many well-documented gnatcatcher populations and metapopulations in San Diego County, Orange County, and Riverside County that support double or triple the overall individuals and include an aerial extent that are orders of magnitude larger.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at (323) 887-1386 should you have any questions regarding the City of Montebello's position on the inclusion of the MHSP property within the SEA Map.

Sincerely,



Alex Hamilton
Director of Planning and Community Development