

State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
South Coast Region
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GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
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Governor's Office of Planning & Research

APR 17 2020

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

April 17, 2020

Jane Choi
City of Los Angeles
City Planning
200 N. Spring St. Room 621
Los Angeles, CA 90012
jane.choi@lacity.org

Subject: Onyx32 – 32 Small Lot Homes, Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND), SCH #2020039066, Los Angeles County

Dear Ms. Choi:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed the above-referenced Onyx32 – 32 Small Lot Homes Project (Project). The Initial Study's supporting documentation includes a *Biological Assessment* (Assessment) and a *Protected Tree Report* (Tree Report). Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that CDFW, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code.

CDFW's Role

CDFW is California's Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources, and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the State [Fish & G. Code, §§ 711.7, subdivision (a) & 1802; Public Resources Code, § 21070; California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, § 15386, subdivision (a)]. CDFW, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (Id., § 1802). Similarly, for purposes of CEQA, CDFW is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect state fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW is also submitting comments as a Responsible Agency under CEQA (Public Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code, including lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take", as defined by state law, of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.), or state-listed rare plant pursuant to the Native Plant Protection Act (NPPA; Fish & G. Code, § 1900 et seq.) authorization as provided by the applicable Fish and Game Code will be required.

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Project Description and Summary

Objective: The proposed Project would consist of the subdivision of the existing 186,956 square foot vacant site (four parcels) into 32 parcels that range in area from 1,673 square feet to 15,381 square feet. The development of 32 small lot residences (one per parcel) would also include the construction of related improvements [new public roads, curb and gutters, retaining walls, driveways, common access areas (public access staircases and private pocket parks), and utilities]. Earthwork for the proposed Project would result in approximately 22,474 cubic yards of cut, 4,960 cubic yards of fill, and 17,514 cubic yards of soil export. Project construction would also require removal of 31 Protected Trees (California Black walnut trees), which would be replaced, with review and approval by the Board of Public Works.

Location: The subject property is located at 4103 E. Supreme Court, 4108 E. Superior Court, 4102 E. Supreme Court, and 2730 N. Onyx Drive, Los Angeles, California, 90032. The Project site occupies an east-southeast-facing slope within the watershed of the Los Angeles River. Elevation on the property ranges from approximately 965 feet at the northeastern corner of the property to 1,160 feet at the western tip. Forest Park Drive runs roughly north/south through the western part of the property.

Comments and Recommendations

CDFW offers the comments and recommendations below to assist the City of Los Angeles (City) in adequately identifying, avoiding, and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources. CDFW recommends the measures or revisions below be included in a science-based monitoring program that contains adaptive management strategies as part of the Project's CEQA mitigation, monitoring and reporting program (Public Resources Code, § 21081.6 and CEQA Guidelines, § 15097).

Comment #1: Impacts to Sensitive Plant Species

Issue: The Initial Study recognizes the need for mitigation for the Southern California black walnut trees due to the required removal of numerous individuals to conduct Project activities. However, Mitigation Measures IV-01 and IV-80 in the Initial Study do not determine a specific replacement ratio for each of the individual Southern California black walnut (*Juglans californica*) trees that will be removed during Project activities.

Specific impacts: Mitigation Measure IV-01 states, "California black walnut trees covered under the City's Protected Tree Ordinance and that would be removed, replace them on a 1:1 basis with the same species trees." However, Mitigation Measure IV-80 states, "A minimum of four trees (tree size to be determined by the City) shall be planted for each protected tree that is removed." If the replacement ratio is 1:1, this may not be sufficient when accounting for the temporal loss of mature Southern California black walnut trees. CDFW considers walnut woodlands distinct biological communities, consisting of trees, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous understory vegetation. The MND only considers the value of the trees and does not appear to characterize the value of these unique communities in a biological setting. Removal or thinning of an understory in walnut woodland directly impacts the functions and values of the entire walnut woodland.

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Why impact would occur: Project implementation includes grading, vegetation clearing, building construction, and other activities that may result in direct mortality, population declines, or local extirpation of sensitive plant species.

Evidence impact would be significant: Southern California black walnut is a sensitive and declining habitat type, is difficult to restore, and takes many years before habitat functions and values in restoration areas are equivalent to impacted areas. The Southern California black walnut is also designated S-3, which is considered vulnerable in the state due to a restricted range with relative few populations. An S-3 ranking indicates there are 21 to 80 occurrences of this community in existence in California, S-2 has 6 to 20 occurrences, and S-1 has less than 6 occurrences. CDFW considers plant communities, alliances, and associations with a statewide ranking of S-1, S-2, S-3 and S-4 as sensitive and declining at the local and regional level (Sawyer et al. 2008). In addition, the Southern California black walnut tree (*Juglans californica*) is covered under the City of Los Angeles Protected Tree Ordinance. Given that these species meet the CEQA definition of Endangered, Rare or Threatened Species that may qualify for listing (CEQA Guidelines, § 15380(d)), impacts to these locally rare resources and adequate mitigation measures that reduce the impacts to less than significant should be described and incorporated into the final environmental document (CEQA Guidelines, § 15125(c)).

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s):

Mitigation Measure #1: The Tree Report, which is to be submitted to the Urban Forestry Division of the Bureau of Street Services, Department of Public Works, City of Los Angeles, should provide a thorough discussion on the presence/absence of sensitive plants on-site and identify measures to protect sensitive plant communities from Project-related direct and indirect impacts.

For example, larger southern California black walnut trees may be over 100 years old and are not readily replaced, which would be considered significant under CEQA. CDFW recommends the Tree Report clarify the size and number of individuals anticipated to be permanently impacted, analyze the significance of impact within the Project footprint, and provide adequate mitigation, if necessary, to reduce impacts to less than significant. Feasible mitigation could include long-term protection in place; on-site nuts/seed collection for an on- or off-site mitigation enhancement/restoration area suitable to the species; and/or off-site land acquisition of similar or better habitat, all to be preserved in perpetuity with the necessary management and endowment funds.

Mitigation Measure #2: CDFW also recommends avoiding any sensitive natural communities found on the Project. If avoidance is not feasible, mitigating at a ratio of no less than 5:1 for impacts to S-3 ranked communities and 7:1 for S-2 communities should be implemented. This ratio is for the acreage and the individual plants that comprise each unique community. CDFW also recommends 'tree removal' be mitigated at a community-level that has been impacted. This mitigation should include a combination of native trees and/or appropriate understory and lower canopy plantings.

All revegetation/restoration areas that will serve as mitigation should include preparation of a restoration plan, to be approved by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and CDFW prior to any ground disturbance. The restoration plan should include restoration and monitoring methods; annual success criteria; contingency actions should success criteria not be met; long-term

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management and maintenance goals; and, a funding mechanism to assure for in perpetuity management and reporting. Areas proposed as mitigation should have a recorded conservation easement and be dedicated to an entity which has been approved to hold/manage lands pursuant to Assembly Bill (AB) 1094 (2012), which amended Government Code sections 65965-65968.

Recommendation #3: Please note, in 2007, the State Legislature required CDFW to develop and maintain a vegetation mapping standard for the state (Fish & Game Code, § 1940). This standard complies with the National Vegetation Classification System, which utilizes alliance- and association-based classification of unique vegetation stands. CDFW utilizes vegetation descriptions found in the Manual of California Vegetation (MCV), found online at <http://vegetation.cnps.org/>. To determine the rarity ranking of vegetation communities on the Project site, the MCV alliance/association community names should be provided as CDFW only tracks rare natural communities using this classification system.

Comment #2: Impacts to Bat Species

Issue: The Project includes activities that will result in the removal of Southern California black walnut trees and surrounding environment that may provide roosting or foraging habitat for bat species. A review of California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) indicates occurrences of bat species within five (5) miles east of the Project site. In addition, Table A (Special-Status Species) identifies two bat species, both of which are California Species of Special Concern (including pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*) and western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis* ssp. *californicus*)) as possible likelihood to occur on site.

Specific impacts: Project activities include the removal of trees, vegetation, and/or structures that may provide maternity roost (e.g., in cavities or under loose bark) or foraging habitat, and therefore has the potential for the direct loss of bats.

Why impacts would occur: The removal of trees and conversion of open space to a residential area will potentially result in the loss of habitat for bats.

Evidence impacts would be significant: Bats are considered non-game mammals and are afforded protection by State law from take and/or harassment, (Fish & G. Code, § 4150; Cal. Code of Regs, § 251.1). Bat species, such as the western yellow bat, can be found year-round in urban areas throughout the south coast region (Miner & Stokes, 2005). Several bat species are considered California Species of Special Concern and meet the CEQA definition of rare, threatened or endangered species (CEQA Guidelines, § 15065). Take of California Species of Special Concern could require a mandatory finding of significance by the Lead Agency (CEQA Guidelines, § 15065).

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s):

Mitigation Measure #1: To the extent feasible, tree removal or relocation should be scheduled between October 1 and February 28, outside of the maternity roosting season. Maternity season lasts from March 1 to September 30. Trees and/or structures determined to be maternity roosts should be left in place until the end of the maternity season.

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Mitigation Measure #2: If trees and/or structures must be removed during the maternity season (March 1 to September 30), a qualified bat specialist should conduct a pre-construction survey to identify those trees and/or structures proposed for disturbance that could provide hibernacula or nursery colony roosting habitat for bats. CDFW recommends the use of acoustic recognition technology to maximize detection of bat species to minimize impacts to sensitive bat species. Each tree and/or structure identified as potentially supporting an active maternity roost should be closely inspected by the bat specialist no greater than 7 days prior to tree disturbance to more precisely determine the presence or absence of roosting bats.

Mitigation Measure #3: If bats are not detected, but the bat specialist determines that roosting bats may be present at any time of year, it is preferable to push any tree down using heavy machinery rather than felling it with a chainsaw. In order to ensure the optimum warning for any roosting bats that may still be present, the tree should be pushed lightly two to three times, with a pause of approximately 30 seconds between each nudge to allow bats to become active. The tree should then be pushed to the ground slowly and should remain in place until it is inspected by a bat specialist. Trees that are known to be bat roosts should not be sawn up or mulched immediately. A period of at least 24 hours, and preferably 48 hours, should elapse prior to such operations to allow bats to escape. Bats should be allowed to escape prior to demolition of buildings. This may be accomplished by placing one-way exclusionary devices into areas where bats are entering a building that allow bats to exit but not enter the building.

The bat specialist should document all demolition monitoring activities and prepare a summary report to the City upon completion of tree disturbance and/or building demolition activities.

Comment #3: Mitigation Replacement and Landscaping

Issue #1: The Tree Report identified two individuals of *Schinus molle* or Peruvian pepper tree (erroneously called California pepper tree) and one Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*). These trees were designated as "Significant tree[s]" under the City's Department of Planning policy, due to Diameter at Breast Height (DBH) greater than eight (8) inches. These Significant Trees will be mitigated as such: "The location of trees planted for the purposes of replacing a removed protected tree shall be clearly indicated on the required landscape plan, which shall also indicate the replacement tree species." It is unclear if these trees will be replaced with the same species. *Schinus molle* and *Eucalyptus globulus* are designated as an invasive species by the California Invasive Pest Plant Council (Cal-IPC).

Issue #2: Landscaping throughout the Project site is indicated in the Initial Study. There does not appear to be a landscaping plan available at this time. It is, therefore, unclear the types of plant species that will be utilized for landscaping purposes on the Project site.

Specific impact: Habitat loss and invasive plants are a leading cause of native biodiversity loss. Invasive plant species spread quickly and can displace native plants, prevent native plant growth, and create monocultures. Invasive plants reduce native plant species diversity.

Why impact would occur: Planting invasive trees or plant species would further degrade natural open space or riparian habitats. In addition, without replacing native trees with similar native tree species, the function and value of the impacted native trees replacement trees would not be fully mitigated.

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Evidence impact would be significant: Invasive species have contributed to the decline of forty-two percent of U.S. threatened and endangered species (USDA Forest Service 2019). Invasive species compete directly with native species for moisture, sunlight, nutrients, and physical space. Cumulative impacts may result due to the City's tree policy and ordinance recommending an invasive tree be planted throughout areas including sensitive, natural habitat.

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s):

Mitigation Measure #1: CDFW recommends that the Project prohibit the planting of any species contained in the Cal-IPC Invasive Plant Checklist listed for any region.

Mitigation Measure #2: CDFW recommends the use of native tree species or non-invasive drought tolerant tree species be used to replace the non-native trees being impacted by the Project.

Mitigation Measure #3: CDFW recommends that all open space preservation/mitigation land be protected in perpetuity with minimal human intrusion. This can be accomplished by recording and executing a perpetual conservation easement in favor of an approved agent dedicated to conserving biological resources. In addition, CDFW recommends all mitigation lands be owned or managed by an entity with experience in managing habitat. CDFW has encountered problems with using portions of privately-owned lots as open-space-habitat mitigation under CEQA because homeowners may grade and remove vegetation on their land with little legal recourse to remedy this loss under CEQA. Mitigation lands should be owned or managed by a conservancy or other land management entity to allow for legal remedies should trespass and clearing/damage occur. A management and monitoring plan, including a funding commitment, should be developed for any conserved land, and implemented in perpetuity to protect existing biological functions and values. Permeable wildlife fencing should be erected around any conserved land to restrict incompatible land uses and signage posted and maintained at conspicuous locations communicating these restrictions to the public.

Filing Fees

The Project, as proposed, could have an impact on fish and/or wildlife, and assessment of filing fees is necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the Lead Agency and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by CDFW. Payment of the fee is required in order for the underlying Project approval to be operative, vested, and final (Cal. Code Regs, tit. 14, § 753.5; Fish & G. Code, § 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, § 21089).

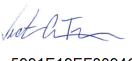
Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Project to assist the City in adequately analyzing and minimizing/mitigating impacts to biological resources. CDFW requests an opportunity to review and comment on any response that the City has to our comments and to receive notification of any forthcoming hearing date(s) for the Project. Questions regarding this letter and further coordination on these issues should be directed to Felicia Silva, Environmental Scientist, at Felicia.Silva@wildlife.ca.gov or (562) 430-0098.

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Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:



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Signing for Erinn Wilson
Environmental Program Manager I

ec: CDFW

Victoria Tang – Los Alamitos
Felicia Silva – Los Alamitos
Andrew Valand – Los Alamitos
Malinda Santonil – Los Alamitos
Susan Howell – San Diego
CEQA Program Coordinator - Sacramento

State Clearinghouse

References:

Miner, Karen L. & Stokes, Drew C. 2005. Bats in the South Coast Ecoregion: Status, Conservation Issues, and Research Needs. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report PSW-GTR-195.
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Sawyer, J.O., Keeler Wolf, T., and Evens J.M. 2008. A manual of California Vegetation, 2nd ed. ISBN 978 0 943460 49 9.

USDA Forest Service. 2019. Invasive Plants. (see <https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/invasives/index.shtml>).

USDA Forest Service. 2019. Pacific Northwest Research Station. (see <https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/invasives/index.shtml>).



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CDFW recommends the following language to be incorporated into a future environmental document for the Project.

Biological Resources			
	Mitigation Measure	Timing	Responsible Party
MM-BIO-1- Impacts to Sensitive Plants	<p>The Tree Report, which is to be submitted to the Urban Forestry Division of the Bureau of Street Services, Department of Public Works, City of Los Angeles, shall provide a thorough discussion on the presence/absence of sensitive plants on-site and identify measures to protect sensitive plant communities from project-related direct and indirect impacts.</p> <p>The Tree Report shall clarify the size and number of individuals anticipated to be permanently impacted, analyze the significance of impact within the Project footprint, and provide adequate mitigation, if necessary, to reduce impacts to less than significant. Feasible mitigation could include long-term protection in place; on-site nuts/seed collection for an on- or off-site mitigation enhancement/restoration area suitable to the species; and/or off-site land acquisition of similar or better habitat, all to be preserved in perpetuity with the necessary management and endowment funds.</p>	Prior to Construction	<p>City of Los Angeles</p> <p>Project Proponent</p>
MM-BIO-2- Sensitive Natural Communities	<p>Avoid any sensitive natural communities found on the Project. If avoidance is not feasible, mitigating at a ratio of no less than 5:1 for impacts to S-3 ranked communities. This mitigation shall include a combination of native trees and/or appropriate understory and lower canopy plantings.</p> <p>All revegetation/restoration areas that will serve as mitigation shall include preparation of a restoration plan, to be approved by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and CDFW prior to any ground disturbance. The restoration</p>	Prior to construction and throughout Project	<p>City of Los Angeles</p> <p>Project Proponent</p>

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	plan shall include restoration and monitoring methods; annual success criteria; contingency actions shall success criteria not be met; long-term management and maintenance goals; and, a funding mechanism to assure for in perpetuity management and reporting.		
MM-BIO-3-Bat Species	To the extent feasible, tree removal or relocation shall be scheduled between October 1 and February 28, outside of the maternity roosting season. Maternity season lasts from March 1 to September 30. Trees and/or structures determined to be maternity roosts shall be left in place until the end of the maternity season.	Prior to Construction	City of Los Angeles
MM-BIO-4-Bat Species	If trees and/or structures must be removed during the maternity season (March 1 to September 30), a qualified bat specialist shall conduct a pre-construction survey to identify those trees and/or structures proposed for disturbance that could provide hibernacula or nursery colony roosting habitat for bats. Acoustic recognition technology shall be used to maximize detection of bat species to minimize impacts to sensitive bat species. Each tree and/or structure identified as potentially supporting an active maternity roost shall be closely inspected by the bat specialist no greater than 7 days prior to tree disturbance to more precisely determine the presence or absence of roosting bats.	Prior to Construction	City of Los Angeles
MM-BIO-5-Bat Species	If bats are not detected, but the bat specialist determines that roosting bats may be present at any time of year, it is preferable to push any tree down using heavy machinery rather than felling it with a chainsaw. In order to ensure the optimum warning for any roosting bats that may still be present, the tree shall be pushed lightly two to three times, with a pause of approximately 30 seconds between each nudge to allow bats to become active. The tree shall then be pushed to the ground slowly and shall remain in place until it is inspected by a bat specialist.	Prior to Construction	City of Los Angeles

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	Trees that are known to be bat roosts shall not be sawn up or mulched immediately. A period of at least 24 hours, and preferably 48 hours, shall elapse prior to such operations to allow bats to escape. Bats shall be allowed to escape prior to demolition of buildings. This may be accomplished by placing one-way exclusionary devices into areas where bats are entering a building that allow bats to exit but not enter the building.		
MM-BIO-6-Prohibit Invasive Plants	Prohibit the planting of any species contained in the Cal-IPC Invasive Plant Checklist listed for any region.	Prior to Construction	City of Los Angeles
MM-BIO-7-Nonnative tree replacement	Native tree species or non-invasive drought tolerant tree species be used to replace the non-native trees being impact by the Project.	During Construction	City of Los Angeles
MM-BIO-8-Conserved land	All open space preservation/mitigation land be protected in perpetuity with minimal human intrusion. This can be accomplished by recording and executing a perpetual conservation easement in favor of an approved agent dedicated to conserving biological resources. In addition, all mitigation lands shall be owned or managed by an entity with experience in managing habitat. Mitigation lands shall be owned or managed by a conservancy or other land management entity to allow for legal remedies in the event trespass and clearing/damage occur. A management and monitoring plan, including a funding commitment, shall be developed for any conserved land, and implemented in perpetuity to protect existing biological functions and values. Permeable wildlife fencing shall be erected around any conserved land to restrict incompatible land uses and signage posted and maintained at conspicuous locations communicating these restrictions to the public.	Post Construction	City of Los Angeles Project Proponent