

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** September 25, 2019 (revised on April 7, 2022)

**To:** Ryan Bensley

**FROM:** Ivan Strudwick

**SUBJECT:** Cultural Resource Survey of the 5.1-acre Oak Grove Residential Project, Community of Coto de Caza, Unincorporated Orange County, California

This memo is intended to verify information from a previous memo (dated March 10, 2016) and to provide a field check with updated information concerning archaeological resources and buildings in the project area, situated at 23432 Vista del Verde in the community of Coto de Caza, California. All work was performed in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

### PROJECT LOCATION AND INFORMATION

#### Project Location

The project is a 5.1-acre area located in the Oak Grove portion of Coto de Caza, a gated community located in the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains in the southeastern area of unincorporated Orange County (County), California. Regionally, the project area is located near the head of Cañada Gobernadora just southeast of Plano Trabuco along the east side of Vista del Verde and west of Via Pajaro, less than 0.2 mile east of Coto de Caza Drive at a point 1 mile east-southeast of where Antonio Parkway crosses State Route 241 (Foothill Transportation Corridor/Toll Road). The project is situated on the south side of the Coto Equestrian Preserve and is depicted on the United States Geological Survey (USGS) *Cañada Gobernadora, California* 7.5-minute topographical quadrangle map in Township 6 South, Range 7 West, within the southeast quarter of the northwest quarter of Section 26 (USGS 1988) (Attachment A: Figure 1). Elevation within the project area ranges from approximately 820-860 feet (ft).

#### Background Information

**Coto Equestrian Preserve** – The Coto Equestrian Preserve has a storied history, including hosting the 1984 Olympic Games modern equestrian pentathlon event where United States competitors won silver and bronze medals.

**Merryhill School** – Merryhill School was a private pre-Kindergarten through Kindergarten elementary school that could enroll 200 students. The school building, located at 23432 Vista del Verde in Coto de Caza, was constructed in 1980, shut down in 2013 because of enrollment issues, and was partially destroyed by fire in 2015. It occupied the southern portion of the current project area along the east side of Vista del Verde portion of the project area. Buildings, play area, and parking lot are

within an area measuring approximately 700 x 400 ft with greatest length fronting Vista del Verde. The existing buildings remain abandoned and boarded up.

*Record Search* - On February 22, 2016, a record search for the project was conducted at the South Central Coastal Information Center (SCCIC) of the California Historical Resources Information System (CHRIS), located at California State University, Fullerton. The record search included the project area and a 0.25-mile buffer area around the project. It was completed to provide a review of known cultural resource survey and excavation reports, as well as an examination of the National Register of Historic Places, the California Register of Historical Resources, California Historical Landmarks, California Points of Historical Interest as identified in the Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) Directory. Because the record search is less than 5 years old it is still valid for purposes of the current assessment. The record search information was described in a memo by LSA archaeologist Phil Fulton dated March 10, 2016 (Fulton 2016).

The record search showed that cultural resource surveys and studies had been completed for nearly the entire Coto Equestrian Preserve and current project area. The record search identified no previously recorded cultural resources within the current project area. The OHP listed no properties within or near the project area. Only one previously recorded site was recorded near the project area. The recorded site, prehistoric artifact scatter P-30-562<sup>1</sup>, contained 8 ground and flaked stone tools on a knoll northeast of the Coto Equestrian Preserve, and was over 0.25-mile from the current project area.<sup>2</sup>

Background information shows that in 1970 Coto de Caza was a privately owned 5,000 acre recreation park. At that time, no buildings existed in the current project area. Aerial photographs available online (NETROnline 2019) show that in 1967, the area was completely natural with no development, but that by 1980, the Merryhill School building and equestrian-related structures such as a long pole-barn and stables had been built in the project area. Other structures, including additional stables and the covered bullpen, had been built just north of the project area by 1980. Many of these structures were removed after 2016. For this reason, none of the buildings within the 5.1-acre project area are older than 42 years. Although the Via Pajaro road existed in 1980, Vista del Verde had not yet been constructed, suggesting that the area was just becoming developed.

*Previous Cultural Resource Survey* – The March 10, 2016 memo (Fulton 2016) describing the record search also describes a pedestrian cultural resource survey of the 5.1-acre project areas at 23432 Vista del Verde. The survey, conducted in early March of 2016, did not result in finding any prehistoric or historic cultural resources in the project area (Fulton 2016). The record search and survey from the March 10, 2016 memo (Fulton 2016) remain valid due to their recent age.

## CURRENT SURVEY

On September 12, 2019 the project area was surveyed for cultural resources. The survey was conducted by walking transects spaced by 7-10 meters (m) in open areas and by intensive surveying

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<sup>1</sup> This site was identified as 30-000562 in the memorandum dated March 10, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> This site was misidentified as being within 0.25 mile of the project area in the memorandum dated March 10, 2016.

of confined areas. The project area exhibited excellent ground visibility except in areas where trees, principally eucalyptus, sycamore, and oak left scattered leaves on the ground. In leaf-covered areas ground visibility ranged from 0-70 percent. Open areas contained in excess of 90 percent ground visibility. Sediment was silt loam with little rock or gravel. Discarded and fragmented wood, concrete, and bits of metal and plastic indicate that the area once contained a built-environment.

No cultural resources were observed in the project area. The only buildings that exist within the project area are the Merryhill School buildings near Vista del Verde, and a maintenance building within the project area just east of the school buildings. None of the buildings are older than 39 years and for this reason were not evaluated under CEQA for historical significance or eligibility for listing in the California Register.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A memo dated March 10, 2016 (Fulton 2016), describes the results of a cultural resource record search and survey for the current 5.1-acre project area at 23432 Vista del Verde, Coto de Caza. The record search did not identify any previously recorded prehistoric or historic resources in the project area and the survey also failed to identify any sites. The record search and survey from the March 10, 2016 memo (Fulton 2016) remain valid due to their recent age.

On September 12, 2019, a cultural resource survey was conducted for the same 5.1-acre project area as described in the March 10, 2016 memo. No cultural resources were identified during the current survey. The current survey found that the only buildings in the project area were those associated with the Merryhill School (23432 Vista del Verde, Coto de Caza), as well as a single maintenance building just east of the school that is within the project area but appears associated with the Coto Equestrian Preserve. The Merryhill School buildings were constructed in 1980 and the maintenance building was also constructed about the same time. As such, the buildings are all about 42 years old. For this reason, the buildings are not historic resources for purposes of CEQA and are not eligible for listing in the California Register.

Because no prehistoric or historic resources exist within the project area, no additional cultural resource work is recommended for the current project area.

## REFERENCES

Fulton, Phil

2016 Memo dated March 10, 2016: Cultural Resources Memorandum of Findings for the Oak Grove Residential Project, Community of Coto de Caza, Unincorporated Orange County, California. LSA Associates, Inc. On file, LSA, 20 Executive Park, Suite 200, Irvine, California 92614.

National Environmental Title Research, LLC (NETROnline).

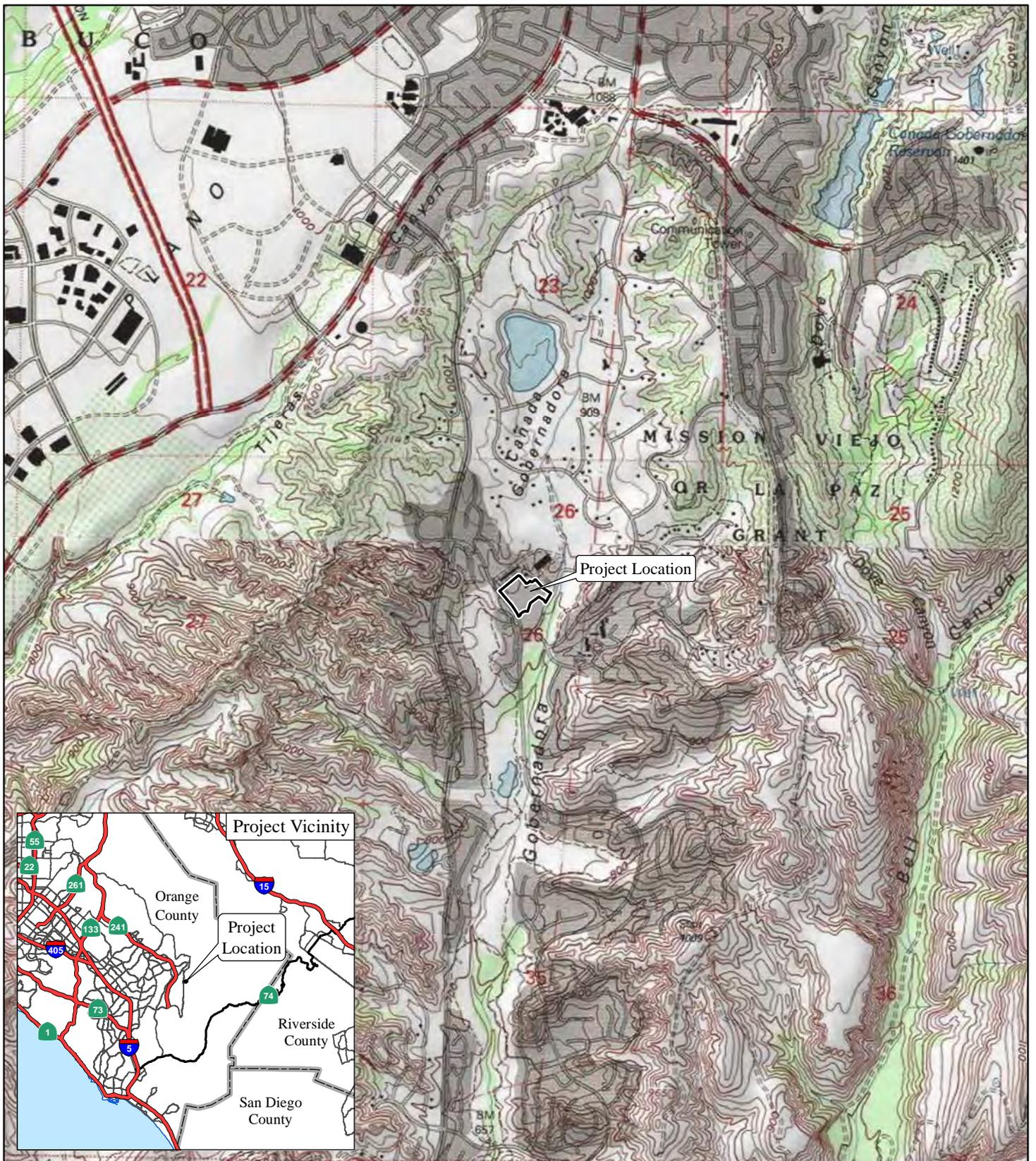
2019 Available at: <https://www.NETROnline.com/viewer> (accessed September 10, 2019).

United States Geological Survey (USGS)

1988 *Cañada Gobernadora, California 7.5'* quadrangle map. United States Geological Survey, Denver, Colorado 80225.

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**ATTACHMENT A**  
**FIGURE 1 – PROJECT LOCATION**



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 Project Location

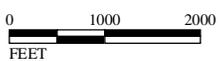


FIGURE 1

*Oak Grove Residential  
Project Location and Vicinity Map*

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** March 10, 2016

**TO:** Alyssa Helper

**FROM:** Phil Fulton, Archaeologist

**SUBJECT:** Cultural Resources Memorandum of Findings for the Oak Grove Residential Project, Community of Coto de Caza, Unincorporated County of Orange (County), California

This memorandum of findings presents the results of a cultural resources assessment that was conducted for the Oak Grove Residential Project (project) in the Community of Coto de Caza, County of Orange (County), California. All work was performed in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

## PROJECT LOCATION AND SITE DESCRIPTION

### Regional Project Location

The project site is located in the Oak Grove portion of Coto de Caza, which is a gated community located in the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains in the southeastern area of unincorporated Orange County, California. The project site is comprised of four parcels (Assessor's Parcel Numbers 804-264-12, -22, -23, and -24). Regionally, the project site and the community of Coto de Caza are located east of State Route 241 and the communities of Las Flores and Rancho Santa Margarita, west of State Route 74 (Ortega Highway) and the Ronald W. Caspers Wilderness Park, north of the Pacific Ocean and the communities of Ladera Ranch and Rancho Mission Viejo, and south of the Santa Ana Mountains. The project is situated in Township 6 South, Range 7 West, in Section 26 of the *Canada Gobernadora, California*, United States Geological Survey (USGS) topographic quadrangle map, San Bernardino Baseline and Meridian (Figure 1; all figures attached).

### Existing Project Site

Altogether, the project site is approximately 5.1 acres. The project site is irregular in shape and bound by equestrian uses to the north, low-density residential uses to the northwest, Via Pajaro and equestrian uses to the east, medium-density residential uses to the southwest, and Vista del Verde and general store retail use to the south. Refer to Figure 1, Regional Project Location, for an overview of the project site's location within the County.

As illustrated on Figure 2, Existing Project Site, 2.9 acres of the project site are developed with the closed and abandoned Merryhill School, and 2.2 acres are developed with facilities associated with a portion of the larger 28.5-acre Coto Equestrian Center. In addition, there are a total of eight Heritage California Oak trees scattered throughout the eastern and central portions of the site, with an additional four oak trees located directly adjacent to the northern boundary of the project site. The site is also characterized by the presence of scattered vegetation and dry soil.

## **Proposed Project**

The project proposes to develop 13 low-density residential parcels on each side of an internal access road (Oak Grove Road) that would bisect the project site from east to west and would terminate in a cul-de-sac near the northeastern corner of the site. The average size of each residential lot would be approximately 13,900 square feet.

Following project implementation, access to the project site would be provided by a single ingress/egress point off Vista del Verde. Consistent with the Coto de Caza Specific Plan, parking would be provided within attached garages, in driveways, and along each side of the proposed Oak Grove Road.

All existing oak trees on the site would be preserved as part of the proposed project. In addition, a 5-foot (ft) high river stone perimeter wall, together with significant screening landscaping, would be installed outside the perimeter wall to screen the project from the Coto Equestrian Center. All horse stalls, tack rooms, and trainer offices on the 2.2-acre equestrian portion of the site would be accommodated in the new Coto Plaza Barn on the 24.2-acre Coto Equestrian Center.

While final construction details are unknown at this time, it is estimated that project construction could potentially be balanced on the site or require up to 2,900 cubic yards (cy) of imported soils.

## **METHODS AND RESULTS**

### **Records Search**

A records search for the project was conducted at the South Central Coastal Information Center (SCCIC) of the California Historical Resources Information System, located at California State University, Fullerton, on February 22, 2016. The records search included the project area and a 0.25-mile radius around it. The SCCIC houses the pertinent archaeological and historic site and survey information necessary to determine whether cultural resources are known to exist within the project area. The records search included a review of all recorded historic and prehistoric archaeological sites within the 0.25-mile radius of the project area, as well as a review of known cultural resource survey and excavation reports. In addition, the National Register of Historic Places, the California Register of Historical Resources, California Historical Landmarks, California Points of Historical Interest, and various local historical registers were examined.

The records search conducted at the SCCIC indicated that three cultural resources studies have been conducted within a 0.25-mile radius of the project area. Two of those studies included portions of the project area. The results of the records search indicate that approximately 25 percent of the project area has been previously surveyed.

There are no previously recorded cultural resources within the project area. One cultural resource has been documented within the 0.25-mile records search area. This resource is Site 30-000562, an artifact scatter containing a mano, cores, and other stone tools located on a knoll approximately 1,000 feet (ft) to the northeast (Leonard 1974).

### **Field Survey**

Approximately 20 percent of the project area contained exposed ground that could be surveyed. The southwestern part of the project area consists of a paved parking lot and the abandoned buildings of Merryhill School. Other areas that could not be surveyed consist of horse stables and equestrian facility

buildings. The surveyable areas were examined by walking parallel transects spaced at a maximum distance of 5 meters. Ground visibility was excellent in these surveyable areas (80–100 percent). At the northern edge of the project area, there is a substantial cut slope of approximately 15 ft creating a level terrace where the project area is located. It is unclear where the cut ends and original ground surface begins, but the entire area was undoubtedly graded to level for Merryhill School and the equestrian facility, although this might have been fairly minimal toward the south.

The sediments observed consist primarily of a brown sandy loam alluvium with a few rounded cobbles and boulders scattered about. One small area contained sandy wash deposits. The entire project area is within the center of Cañada Gobernadora. Development of the area has completely modified the topography and hydrology of the area.

No archaeological resources were observed during the survey, and the project area appears to be 100 percent disturbed due to the grading that was done to level the area.

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The records search conducted at the SCCIC revealed that no cultural resources have been documented within the project area, and no cultural resources were observed during the pedestrian survey of the project area despite the excellent ground visibility in the surveyable portion of the project area.

The project area is located within the floor of Cañada Gobernadora in an area where several tributaries join the main canyon. The project area has been completely disturbed by grading.

Based on the current study, there appears to be little potential for the project to impact cultural resources, and mitigation of cultural resources is not required at this time. If archaeological resources are encountered during construction activities, all work in the immediate vicinity of the find should be halted until a qualified archaeologist can assess the discovery for significance.

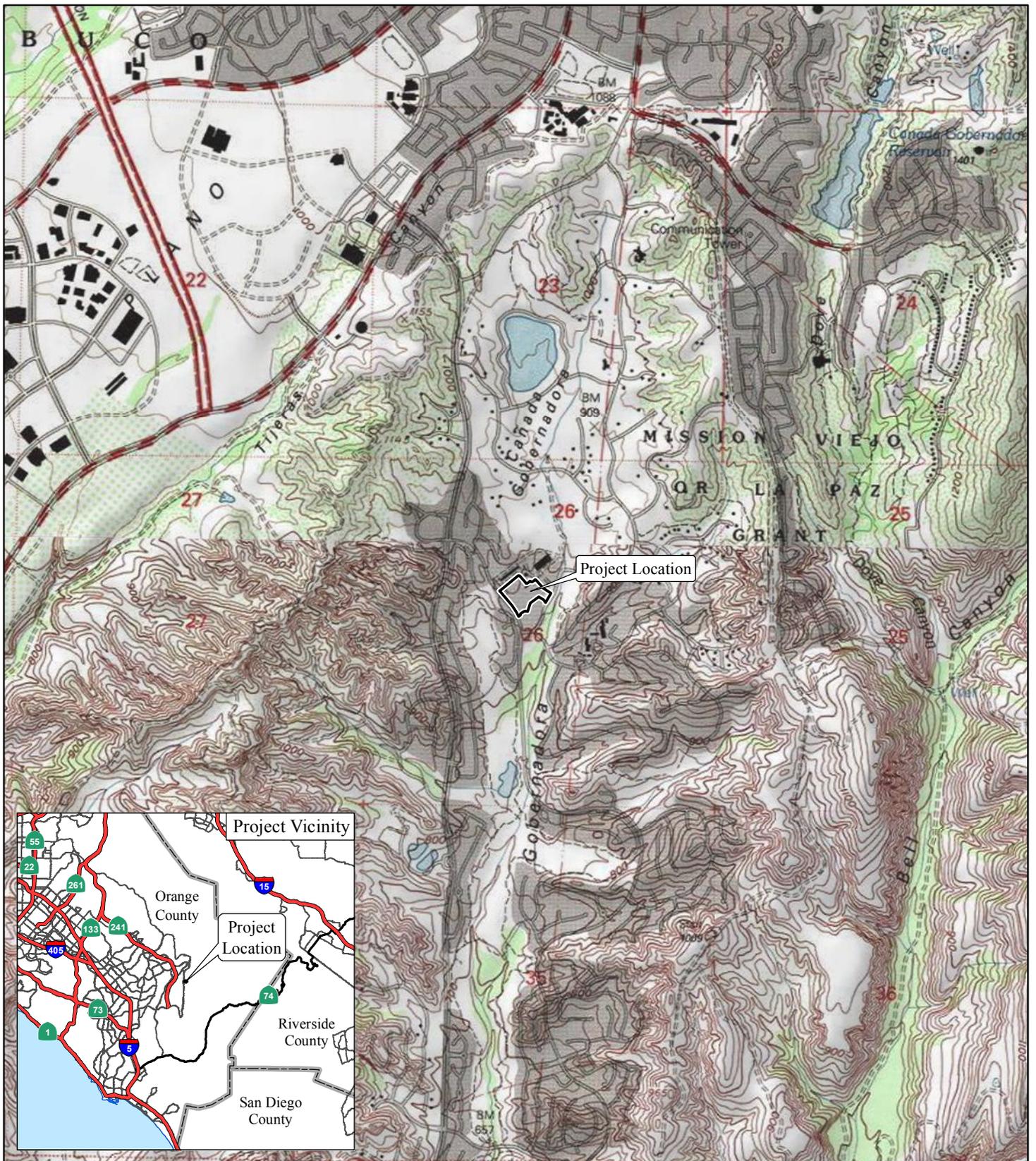
If human remains are unearthed, State Health and Safety Code Section 7050.5 states that no further disturbance shall occur until the County Coroner has made a determination of origin and disposition pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 5097.98. The County Coroner must be notified of the find immediately. If the remains are determined to be Native American, the County Coroner will notify the Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC), which will determine and notify a Most Likely Descendant (MLD).

With the permission of the landowner or his/her authorized representative, the MLD may inspect the site of the discovery. The MLD shall complete the inspection within 48 hours of notification by the NAHC. The MLD will have the opportunity to offer recommendations for the disposition of the remains.

Attachments: Figure 1: Regional Project Location  
Figure 2: Existing Project Site

## **REFERENCE**

Leonard, N.  
1974 University of California Archaeological Site Survey Record for Site 30-000562. On file, South Central Coastal Information Center, California State University, Fullerton.

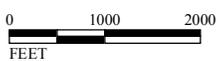


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 Project Location

FIGURE 2



*Oak Grove Residential  
Project Location and Vicinity Map*

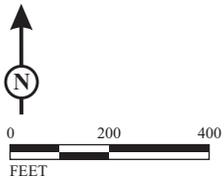
SOURCE: USGS 7.5' Quad - Santiago Peak (1997) and Canada Gobernadora (1997), CA  
 F:\OAK1601\GIS\ProjLocation.mxd (2/29/2016)



PROJECT SITE

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FIGURE 2



SOURCE: Google Earth

Oak Grove Residential  
Existing Project Site