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LOS ANGELES

Gates Would Cut Off Public Access

Bicyclists, runners and others say a Brentwood neighborhood's plan would deny them entry to mountain parkland. Residents want security.

By Martha Groves
Times Staff Writer

July 29, 2004

The metal gates haven't even gone up yet in front of a pricey Brentwood community, but fired-up opponents are already seeking to unhinge them.

The dust-up is the latest round in a long-running fight between residents seeking to create a private, gated neighborhood and hikers, bicyclists and runners who insist that the area should remain open because it leads to popular Santa Monica Mountains parkland.

Residents of "the Crown," a stretch of townhomes on a ridge-top overlooking the Sepulveda Pass, began pushing in 1995 to close off Canyonback Road. The quarter-mile-long street separates Mandeville Canyon from the pass and connects two sections of a fire road that is used weekly by hundreds of joggers, dog walkers and nature lovers.

Gate proponents cheered when the Los Angeles City Council in April 2003 voted 13 to 0 to let them proceed with their plans.

For several months, with the backing of Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, the Crown Homeowners Assn., which represents 71 Canyonback townhouse owners, set about gathering the required permits.

In June, under a temporary permit, the group began building a handful of concrete-and-brick pillars that would anchor an electronically controlled gate where Canyonback intersects Mountaingate Drive, west of the San Diego Freeway.

"The residents of the Crown Homeowners Assn. are seeking to gain greater security for their little piece

of the Mountaingate community," said Gary Morris, a consultant who represents the homeowners. They are the only residents in the 275-home Mountaingate area who are not behind gates, Morris added.

Since then, many nearby residents and users of the fire road have fired off letters to Miscikowski, protesting that the gate would limit public access to the popular parkland — part of a 20,000-acre area known as the Big Wild — and possibly impede firetrucks heading into the bone-dry area.

"How can the city allow a very small enclave of wealthy homeowners to block or control public access to public land?" asked Wendy-Sue Rosen, president of the Upper Mandeville Canyon Assn.

She and others have criticized the city for allowing the Crown homeowners to begin construction before all issues had been resolved and before final permits were secured.

In particular, critics allege that the gate construction violates a state law providing that no street may be closed from public access until it has been officially removed from public use.

"The fact that our community was never notified that the city was considering closing off free access to public mountain parkland abutting our neighborhood, and used day and night by residents, is inexcusable," Rosen wrote in a letter to Miscikowski.

Julie Pietroski, senior legislative deputy for Miscikowski, said the councilwoman's office had insisted that the gate be designed to address concerns over access. One condition provides that pedestrians and bicyclists are to be given access to the street from sunrise to sunset.

But Eric Edmunds, an avid wilderness trail runner, said the arrangement is far from ideal. Bikers and hikers seeking entry would have to ring to get the attention of a guard, employed by the Crown homeowners and stationed half a mile down Mountaingate. They would stand in front of a video camera and wait for the guard to buzz them in.

"Two to three years from now," Edmunds said, "the guard will basically be under orders to keep people out."

Among groups protesting the gate arrangement are the Sierra Club's Santa Monica Mountains Task Force, the Center for Law in the Public Interest, and the Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Assn.

Miscikowski, who lives in a gated Brentwood community, has scheduled a meeting for today to allow the two sides to discuss their differences.

"She's trying to bring people together and work out a compromise that preserves access," said Kevin Keller, Miscikowski's chief planning deputy. "The access is very important."

Construction of the gates, meanwhile, is proceeding, Edmunds said. Edmunds, an attorney, said he believes state law supports the opponents' view.

He cited a 1994 case involving gates that residents erected in the Whitley Heights neighborhood to

restrict Hollywood Bowl-related traffic.

A three-judge appeals court panel held that the gates violated state law intended to prevent cities from bowing to local pressure groups seeking to restrict access.

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