

COMMENTARY



Green space, parks face another threat



COMMON SENSES

BY CAROLE ORLIN

I have just been made aware of some "breaking news" that I feel is important to share with you. Many of us choose to live in Southern California because we love the outdoors and the wonderful Southern California lifestyle. We put up with the traffic and congestion to be able to hike, bike, jog and generally enjoy the outdoors and breathtaking views of our beautiful city. Although some development is inevitable, reasonable controls need to be enforced so that we do not find ourselves in the position of losing green space and park land for our recreational enjoyment.

Nothing exemplifies the Southern California lifestyle more than the Westridge-Canyon Back Wilderness Park in the Santa Monica Mountains, not only because of its close proximity, but also because of its breathtaking beauty. Nicknamed the "Big Wild," its 21,000 acres of natural beauty stretch from the San Fernando Valley to the Pacific Ocean. There are a myriad of trails and roads within it. Bicyclists often ride from the Westridge trailhead all the way to the San Fernando Valley. It's a wonderful trail for hikers, joggers and bikers alike. I recently learned that private developers and wealthy homeowners are trying to block access to the Westridge Canyon Back Wilderness Park. Evidently, last year a wealthy homeowners' association tried to gate off Canyonback road to restrict public access to public park land. Construction was stopped at the Canyonback Gate, thanks to strong public opposition, but only temporarily. Now, a new development is being planned along Canyonback Ridge to the south of Canyonback Road. The developer wants to privatize the area, including Canyonback Trail.

According to the Center for Law in the Public Interest, if the city approves this, "The public will be forced to beg access from residents of the planned private enclave." In spite of the fact that the developer promises that he will provide pedestrian access, he is not addressing the issue that future residents could restrict or prohibit public access if they so desire. The Center for Law in the Public Interest high-

lights the fact that "this plan should have been fully analyzed in the Environmental Impact Report (EIR), but the EIR ignores the issue. The developer must circulate an EIR that analyzes these impacts and how to maintain public access."

The center goes on to inform us of another "scheme that calls for the creation of a substandard 'bypass trail' to route trail users off Canyonback Road, which would be privatized and gated. This two-mile bypass trail would be carved into the steep, unstable, landslide-ridden slopes that would be impossible to maintain, thereby degrading public access." This bypass trail would destabilize the hillsides, placing property and lives at risk. If this were to happen, Canyonback Road would be gated and privatized, and yet another exquisite piece of California would be lost forever to the public. Once again public land will be "owned" by a small number of wealthy homeowners. Even if Los Angeles were not as park-poor as it already is, it would be a tragedy for the public to lose this land to the privileged few. This is but one example of our public land slowly being chipped away for the desires of a few. We have seen similar issues with attempts to privatize beaches — and the long, costly legal battles that ensued.

There are some things we can do about this. First, send an opposition letter to the Canyon Back Alliance: fax (310) 201-2110 or e-mail info@canyonback.org.

Next, check for updates at www.canyonback.org and the Center for Law in the Public Interest's blog at www.clipi.org/blog. An action group that appears quite informative is the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which was established by the California State Legislature in 1980. Its mission is to buy back, preserve, protect, restore and enhance treasured pieces of Southern California to form an interlinking system of urban, rural and river parks, open space trails and wildlife habitats that are easily accessible to the general public. Last, but by no means least, pass this message around. It seems this is being kept under wraps — I assume to get it passed as easily and quickly as possible. Once it's done, as we all know, it will be almost impossible to undo. It's a sad fact of life that we have to be ever vigilant and put forth significant effort in order to continue to hold onto the ever-shrinking open green space and park land we enjoy here in Southern California.

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