

Oct. 12th, 2015

Escondido Planning Department,

I am writing this letter to provide comments for the scoping effort underway to develop the EIR for the Safari Highlands Ranch development. My partner is a landowner in unincorporated San Diego County just north (separated by one parcel) from the northern boundary of the proposed development. We are part time residents there and conduct a business raising exotic birds that relies on the peace and quiet that the area offers. This development will destroy all the things we love about the area, this is non-mitigatable. We would like the EIR to analyze impacts to our lifestyle and our neighbor's lifestyle by examining:

- Viewshed impact, not just from the City of Escondido, but also from the unincorporated residences to the north, San Dieguito River Park lands, the San Pasqual Valley and the Safari Park.
- Noise impacts, both during construction and from residences. This includes vehicle noise, power equipment, barking dogs, etc. During construction there will need to be blasting and grading to get a very rough and rocky terrain flat enough for home development. How long will this last? Will we be compensated for this loss of our quality of life?
- Impacts to local wildlife, and impacts to the high quality bird life in the region from domestic cats and dogs, and impacts from noise and lights to wildlife.

Fire:

This area is mapped as VERY HIGH fire danger on County emergency planning sites. It is important to not understate this danger. This is a very high danger area in the most fire prone ecosystem on Earth. We have experienced three fires since acquiring property in the area, the first of which came so rapidly there was not time to escape and my partner sheltered in place. What are the dangers of bringing many more residents into the area, who may or may not have time to evacuate in a fire emergency? How will this endanger first responders? These issues need to be analyzed exhaustively. The proposal includes an open space between Safari Highlands Ranch and Rancho San Pasqual? New residents bring an increased risk of wildfire ignitions. The planned open space will provide plenty of fuel. The fact that this development will greatly increase fire danger to existing residents needs to be fully divulged in the EIR.

The proposal includes a side-slope escape route to the north, which would be a death trap and would also create a grading impact highly visible from all of Escondido. Would this escape route adequately serve residents in a Santa Ana style firestorm?

Economics:

At the City Council meeting concerning this project it was stated by one of the councilmembers that a goal for the City of Escondido is to expand its "high-end" housing options. I believe this is also stated in the Escondido General Plan. There seems to be a belief that such housing will help economic development in Escondido. This seems like wishful "trickle down economic" thinking. It does not seem responsible to make a precedent setting land use decision based on vague, unsupported economic goals.

I believe it is the responsibility of the Escondido Planning commission, in order to inform the decision makers and public, to conduct an objective study of exactly what the economic costs versus benefits of Safari Highlands Ranch would be. This study should look at:

- Whether high cost housing additions help economic development when low-cost affordable housing is already difficult to find in the region.
- Whether residents of Safari Highlands Ranch would actually drive business investment in Escondido, when they will have an equal, or shorter commuting distance to places like Rancho Bernardo, that already have high paying jobs.
- How distant, cul-de-sac style development will attract entrepreneurs when study after study have shown a trend towards young entrepreneurs and millennials preferring high density, urban style development with thriving city centers.
- Will the cost to the city to operate services (schools, fire, policing, water, sewage) for such a distant enclave be fully compensated by taxes from residents of the Safari Highlands Ranch? Without relying on hoped for economic development?
- How will average Escondido citizens benefit from the proposed community center and parks that are so far away from their homes?

In addition, the EIR should study how Safari Highlands Ranch will affect tourism to the Safari Park by altering views from the park and its attractions, and by increasing traffic and congestion in the area.

Planning:

The City needs to truly examine how this fits in with “Smart Growth” as described in the Escondido General Plan. This is a leap frog development with you incorporate the proposed open space. Mileage for residents to the nearest basic grocery store will be 7 mile drives each way.

In general, this EIR needs to really evaluate and argue why this type of development is suddenly considered appropriate in an area the County has rejected for similar development in the past and recently downzoned to 80 acre parcels due to concerns about environmental impacts and EXTREMELY high fire danger.

The Escondido Planning Department owes it to the citizens of Escondido and San Diego County to fully and objectively study this project. I’m confident that a full and impartial analysis will show that Safari Highlands Ranch would be a disaster for the local environment, with no economic benefit for the local community.

Thank You,
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