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July 9, 2019

Planning Commission of Monterey County
Monterey County Resource Management Agency
Attn: Mike Novo
1441 Schilling Place – South, 2nd Floor
Salinas, CA 93901
Sent via email: novom@co.monterey.ca.us

Re: Paraiso Springs Resort, Project No. PLN040183

Dear Mr. Novo and Commissioners,

We appreciate your preparation of a Recirculated Draft EIR [June 2019] (“RDEIR”) responding to public comments on the previous Recirculated DEIR [February 3, 2018] and Final EIR [March 14, 2019] (“FEIR”), including the comments we submitted on March 20, 2019, regarding wildfire risks associated with the proposed Paraiso Springs Resort Development (the “Project”). We have reviewed the additional information presented and acknowledge and appreciate that you have provided more information regarding wildfire risks associated with the proposed Project than was included in the previous analyses. While we thank you for including that additional information, we remain concerned that the risks of wildfire have not been adequately addressed.¹ Specifically, the Project still does not comply with state requirements for development in State Responsibility Areas. Additionally, the RDEIR does not comply with CEQA’s requirement to analyze and mitigate the Project’s wildfire impacts.

The Project does not comply with the requirements for State Responsibility Areas.

The Project does not comply with the state’s dead end road limitations and road width limitations applicable to State Responsibility Areas (SRA). (Cal. Code. Regs., tit. 14, § 1273.09 and 1273.01; adopted pursuant to Pub. Res. Code. § 4290.) In the RDEIR, the County expresses its view that the dead end road limitation does not apply to the Project because the road, having been built in the 19th century and maintained by the County, is not subject to the SRA regulations. (RDEIR, p. 62.) Neither the regulations nor the statute setting forth the SRA

¹ This letter is not intended, and should not be construed, as an exhaustive discussion of the RDEIR’s compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) or the Project’s compliance with other applicable legal requirements.

requirements, however, include an exemption for historic roads or roads maintained by the County. In general, the SRA requirements apply to any application for new construction with only limited exceptions for certain parcel or tentative maps approved before 1991 and roads used solely for agriculture, mining, or timber related purposes. (See Cal. Code. Regs., tit. 14, § 1270.02.)

The RDEIR further states that the Project meets the intent of the dead end road limitation, but does not provide any support for its understanding of that intent, nor a justification for why compliance with the intent would excuse non-compliance with the clear regulatory requirement. (RDEIR, p. 62.) The RDEIR suggests that mitigation measure 3.7-6a (regarding the Fire Protection Plan to be developed) is being applied to the Proposed Project as if the SRA requirements did apply to the Project. (RDEIR, p. 62.) However, the Fire Protection Plan does not propose to modify the dead end nature of the road. CEQA requires mitigation that is triggered by the need to avoid significant environmental impacts; CEQA mitigation may not be used to excuse non-compliance with independent state regulatory requirements.

Likewise the RDEIR suggest that the Project complies with state law requiring two 10-foot travel lands because 98% of the road would comply—only a “small area of 150 feet” due to topographical constraints would be limited to an 18-foot wide road. (RDEIR, p.61.) However, substantial compliance is not the state standard. A small section of inadequate road width could create a bottleneck that would hamper evacuation, particularly where emergency response vehicles are trying access the site at the very same time others are seeking to exit the site. While the SRA regulations provide a process for requesting exceptions to the standards (Cal. Code. Regs., tit. 14, §§ 1270.07 and 1270.08), the RDEIR does not suggest that an exception through this process has been requested or approved.

The RDEIR does not comply with CEQA’s requirement to analyze and mitigate the Project’s wildfire impacts.

The RDEIR considered the questions identified in section XX of the Updated CEQA Guidelines regarding wildfire risk (RDEIR, pp. 59-72), which we appreciate. The RDEIR did not, however, address the related but separate question in Section IX(g) of Appendix G regarding whether the Project would “expose people or structures, either directly or indirectly, to a significant risk of loss, injury, or death involving wildland fires.” This issue should also be addressed. (See CEQA Guidelines § 15126.2, subd. (a) [requiring the evaluation of potentially significant environmental impacts of locating development in areas susceptible to hazardous conditions such as wildfire risk areas, especially as identified in hazard maps and risk assessments]; *California Building Industry Assn. v. Bay Area Air Quality Management Dist.* (2015) 62 Cal.4th 369, 388 [holding that while CEQA does not require consideration of the environment’s effect on a project, it does require analysis of the project’s impacts on the existing environment].)

In addition, for the wildfire associated risks that the RDEIR did analyze—those in Section XX of Appendix G—the RDEIR concludes that there are potentially significant effects, but that these effects are less than significant after mitigation. The RDEIR proposes additional mitigation measures, but these measures largely rely on development of future fire prevention plans. With respect to this project and the proposed future plans, CEQA prohibits the deferral of mitigation. (See CEQA Guidelines § 15126.4(a)(1)(B).) While the development of mitigation measures may sometimes be appropriate, there is no reason here for this failure to prepare the evacuation plan as part of the DEIR or FEIR, nor have any performance standards or potential mitigation measures been identified. (*Ibid*; see also, e.g., *San Joaquin Raptor Rescue Center v. County of Merced* (2007) 149 Cal.App.4th 645, 671 [mitigation measure that included development of post-FEIR management plan was found to be improperly deferred mitigation where no basis was provided for why development of mitigation measures needed to be deferred to future plans and, no specific criteria, performance standards, or potential mitigation measures were set forth in EIR].)

In our previous comments, we also requested that the FEIR address evacuation in the event of fire. Specifically, we highlighted the need to consider: (i) the evacuation of employees and guests in the event of a fire, (ii) the increased challenges that existing users of the sole ingress and egress point will face in the event of an evacuation due to the added users on the road, and (iii) the increased challenges that firefighters and emergency responders would face accessing the site and preventing the spread of a wildfire due to the simultaneous evacuation of guests and employees from the Project and neighboring areas. (March 20, 2019 letter, pp. 4-5). Again, we appreciate that you have now included an evacuation plan in the RDEIR, but find that it and the supporting analysis it relies upon falls short of addressing the full scope of issues we believe are required for analysis under CEQA in order to provide full information to decision makers and the public about the wildfire risks associated with the Project.

In addition, the RDEIR does not seem to disclose or address the possibility of a fire starting down canyon and potentially blocking Paraiso Springs Road altogether. While the RDEIR describes that the site will be designed to serve as a temporary refuge area during fire, which could conceivably help to mitigate the risk of a down canyon fire occurring that blocks evacuation via Paraiso springs Road, this is not fleshed out in any detail. The RDEIR also does not address the ability of emergency vehicles to efficiently access the site while the sole ingress and egress road is also being utilized for evacuation.²

² The letter from Keith Higgins, which is indirectly referenced in the RDEIR, includes just a conclusory comment on this issue—“The one lane on the road going toward the project site would remain open almost exclusively to inbound emergency access. In summary, the road is capable of handling incoming and outgoing traffic in a mass evacuation with no significant conflicts with the surrounding neighbor or incoming emergency vehicles.” (March 8, 2019 Letter from Keith Higgins, Traffic Engineer, referenced in Appendix 2 of the RDEIR, p. 140.)

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We appreciate your consideration of our comments and respectfully request that you revise the RFEIR accordingly. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our comments, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,



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Deputy Attorney General

For XAVIER BECERRA
Attorney General