

Conservation Views

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Dean Wallraff, Conservation Chair,

Verdugo Hills Group, Angeles Chapter, Sierra Club



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What's Going On with Canyon Hills?

Canyon Hills is a proposed housing development containing 280 single-family homes on 194 acres within an 887-acre site, which is currently open space in the Verdugo Mountains in Sunland, Tujunga and La Tuna Canyon in the city of Los Angeles. It's bounded by Verdugo Crestline Drive on the north and La Tuna Canyon Road on the south. The Foothill Freeway (the I-210 Scenic Corridor) bisects the project site. The Sierra Club has taken a position against the development. Our campaign slogan has been "Say NO to Canyon Hills." By that we don't mean that the developer has no right to build on the property; we mean that we would like the City of Los Angeles to take the following position:

"We (the City) would like to preserve as much as possible of the remaining open space in the Verdugo Mountains for the long term, so we would prefer that the property that you (the developer) own be conveyed in its entirety to an agency that would preserve it as open space in perpetuity. We will work to find such an agency and help arrange a sale satisfactory to all parties, but we can't do it in the short term; it may take a few years, or even longer, to arrange. If, in the meantime, you want to build on your property, of course you have the right to do that. Just don't expect any breaks from the city on the rules. No zone changes, no plan amendments, the strictest legally-defensible interpretations of all the regulations such as the Slope Density Ordinance."

On Nov. 17 the Sunland-Tujunga Neighborhood Council passed a resolution against approving the Canyon Hills project in its present form. The staff of the Los Angeles City Planning Dept. held a hearing in Tujunga on Dec. 9. There was a very large turnout and opponents of the project greatly outnumbered its proponents. After hearing from the developer and the public at the hearing, the staff of the Planning Dept. issued a ruling stating that the developer can build "by right" (i.e. under existing law and regulations) 175 houses spread across the 887 acres of the site.

There is controversy about this number of houses. The site is subject to L.A.'s Slope Density Ordinance, which calls for reduced density on steeper terrain. Unfortunately, the ordinance is designed so that, on steep terrain, the number of allowed dwelling units is overly sensitive to small changes in steepness. Here is a table that shows four figures for the number of dwellings allowed by right on the Canyon Hills property and the corresponding steepness values, calculated over the entire 887 acres:

Average Natural Slope	Slope Angle	Dwellings Allowed
48.3%	25.8°	45
47.2%	25.3°	71
46.6%	24.9°	87
43.1%	23.3°	175

A 2½-degree difference in average slope angle means that the developer may build 175 houses on the property instead of 45.

Whitebird contends that the 175-dwelling figure is correct and has submitted a map to prove it. This map was generated by interpolating 25-foot contours onto a standard 7.5' USGS topo map with 40-foot contours, the same type that's used by hikers for navigation. One problem is that interpolating 25-foot contours between the 40-foot map contours adds no new information and doesn't improve the accuracy. The coarse spatial accuracy and widely-spaced contour lines smooth and blur the topography, omitting jigs and jags that add to the steepness. This guarantees that the resulting slope estimate will be lower than the actual slope value; the only question is: by how much? Could it be by 2½ degrees?

The other major problem with Whitebird's figure is that they're not calculating the allowable density from the map in the way specified by the L.A. Municipal Code. They're dividing the property up with a grid and calculating the density allowed within each grid cell, applying the limiting minimum density of 0.05 dwellings/acre to each cell; they should be calculating the average slope over the whole property and then applying the minimum-density limit to the whole. When the proper procedure is followed, even using their own map, the result is an average slope of 47.2%, which allows a maximum of 71 dwellings on the 887-acre property. In the Environmental Impact Report (EIR), issued over a year ago, Whitebird stated that 87 houses was the maximum allowable according to the Slope Density Ordinance.

To date, the City Planning Dept. has ratified the developer's calculations, resulting in the decision reported above that Whitebird can build 175 houses by right, spread across the entire property. Several community groups, including the Sierra Club, have appealed this decision, on the bases that the calculations were not performed in accordance with the Municipal Code, that the map is too inaccurate to be used for this purpose, and that the original EIR didn't properly analyze the environmental impact of 175 houses spread out across the property.

But the developer doesn't want to build the project like this; they just want to use their supposed right to do so as a bargaining lever with the City and with the community in Sunland, Tujunga, Shadow Hills, La Crescenta and La Tuna Canyon. Dale Thrush, the land-use Planning Deputy in Council District 2 (Wendy Greuel's) explained to a community meeting in early January that the developer had the right to build 175 5-acre ranchettes on this property, and these would each sell for more than the houses they'd originally planned to build. Whitebird wouldn't volunteer to give up this extra income, so, if we wanted the developer to build on smaller lots on a portion of the

property so that the rest could be preserved as open space, the developer would need to be allowed to build more than 175 houses, though perhaps not quite as many as the 280 he originally proposed to build.

The subtext at the City Planning Commission hearing on Jan. 27 was similar. We were appealing the 175-house ruling, and also coming out in force against Whitebird's original request for zoning and plan changes to allow the full 280-home development on part of the property, with the rest supposedly to be conveyed to a public agency to be retained as open space. It was clear that the Planning Commission saw the issue the way the developer wanted it framed: as a choice between having the entire 887 acres developed as 5-acre ranchettes and approving the zone and plan changes, perhaps with a slight reduction in the number of houses built.

If it turned out that the maximum number of units the developer could build was really 71 or less, that would dramatically change the discussion. But we'll probably find out too late. As Jack Rubens, Whitebird's attorney said at the hearing, if the plan and zone changes are approved, the number of houses allowed under the Slope Density Ordinance will be moot. The developer might know that their calculation won't stand up to scrutiny, but they're hoping it will stand up long enough to get their project approved as they proposed it originally. As an important historical figure once said concerning war, "no one will ever ask the victor if he told the truth."

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