



San Fernando Valley Audubon Society

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For nature education and conservation of wildlife

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May 26, 2008

Mr. Ronald Kosinski, Deputy District Director
Division of Environmental Planning
California Department of Transportation, District 7
100 South Main Street, MS 16A
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Mr. Kosinski,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments on the EA/IS for the proposed SB I-405 to WB US-101 Connector Project on behalf of San Fernando Valley Audubon Society (SFVAS). SFVAS is a 2,100 member environmental organization that operates an extensive environmental educational program for school children in the wildlife reserve. Our mission is to protect habitat and promote wildlife education. We urge Caltrans to reject both Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 because of the unacceptable harm either of these Alternatives would inflict on the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve.

San Fernando Valley Audubon Society adamantly opposes any project that would adversely impact the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve. Alternatives #2 and #3 would permanently impair the natural resources of the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Refuge with noise and light pollution, as well as significantly diminishing its value to its human visitors. SFVAS urges Caltrans to adopt either Alternative #1 or the No Build Alternative. If Alternatives #1, #2, and #3 would require widening of Haskell Creek to maintain flood control capacity of Sepulveda Basin, SFVAS urges Caltrans to adopt the No Build Alternative.

This letter will first address why protecting the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve is so important. Then it will note significant errors and deficiencies that we have found in the EA/IS.

The Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve is a unique urban wildlife refuge, sheltering fine examples of riparian, grassland, and woodland habitat. Over 240 species of resident and migratory birds forage and nest in the reserve. Additionally there are outstanding communities of California native plants and insects.

Thousands of public school children, birdwatchers, photographers, joggers, walkers and families with small children visit the reserve, finding a nearby refuge from the hubbub of the city. Neighbors, as well as nature lovers from the greater area visit frequently to hear the wind rustle through the cottonwood leaves or to marvel at a wading Great Blue Heron.

San Fernando Valley Audubon Society's outstanding Sepulveda Basin Environmental Education Program provides environmental education for 3,000 schoolchildren, many from low income homes, every year. While at the Wildlife Reserve, children enjoy watching White Pelicans, cormorants, egrets, herons and hawks through binoculars. They study tiny plankton from the lake under microscopes and learn about native plants and animals. The trained naturalists introduce concepts like ecology, reclaimed water, riparian habitat and flood control.

In addition to the guided nature walks in the Wildlife Reserve that SFVAS offers students, scouting groups, and the public, other groups also bring their students to the reserve. These groups include public and private schools, colleges and universities, and teacher-training programs.

San Fernando Valley Audubon urges that Alternatives #2 and #3 be discarded. Both of these Alternatives would permanently intrude into the peace and tranquility of the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve, in particular into the 60-acre heart of the Reserve, the area near the lake where most strolls, bird walks and field trips take place. Alternative # 2 would cover or cut off 17 acres from the rest of the Wildlife Reserve with an on-ramp and an off-ramp. Alternative # 3 would cover or cut off 21.5 acres. Both Alternatives would cause noise and light pollution to intrude into the heart of the Wildlife Reserve. The impact on both wildlife and human users of the refuge is grim to contemplate. After the clangor and disruptions of a long construction period, the quiet and tranquility will be forever lost to the roar of traffic.

Although Alternative #1 would eliminate access to the 101 from the intersection of Burbank Boulevard and the 405, the improved traffic conditions would benefit the

public by enhancing safety and alleviating traffic congestion on the freeway. Under Alternative #1, motorists would still be able to access the 101 at Balboa Boulevard, Hayvenhurst Avenue and Van Nuys Boulevard.

If traffic analyses show that Alternative #1 will increase surface street congestion by an unacceptable amount, San Fernando Valley Audubon endorses the No Build Alternative. We contend that expanding the connector will not improve the flow of traffic on the heavily congested 405 and 101 freeways sufficiently to justify the destructive impacts of the other Alternatives.

SFVAS found no discussion of a significant issue and several errors in the EA/IS and disagrees with some of its findings.

Widening of Haskell Creek for Flood Capacity:

This possibility is only mentioned in one line of the EA/IS, but it is extremely significant. If widening of Haskell Creek to mitigate reduction to the flood control function of the Sepulveda Basin is a necessary consequence of all three Alternatives, none of the Alternatives is acceptable. If Haskell Creek is widened anywhere within the Wildlife Reserve, actual and developing nesting habitat of the endangered Least Bell's Vireo would be destroyed. This habitat is important to other sensitive species of migratory songbirds, including the Yellow-breasted Chat.

As indicated in the EA/IS, Alternatives 1, 2, and 3 would all reduce the flood water capacity of the Sepulveda Basin and require mitigation measures. One proposed on page 88 of the EA/IS is "Widening the existing dirt canal inside the basin between Route 405 and Woodley Avenue (Haskell Channel). This proposal will fulfill requirements to increase storage volume inside the basin and no water impounded."

Haskell Creek is bordered by mature riparian trees along its banks as it flows south between the Tillman Water Treatment Plant and Woodley Park, then between Woodley Park and the turf grass section of the Wildlife Reserve, and then through the Wildlife Reserve, where it separates the North and West Reserve and finally flows between sections of the South Reserve and into the Los Angeles River.

Over the years, starting in 1979, public agencies and volunteers have planted hundreds of Fremont Cottonwood trees and other riparian trees next to Haskell Creek. The most recent such planting was a mitigation project by the Los Angeles

Department of Water and Power. In 1998, the section of Haskell Creek between the North and West Reserve was recontoured and willows and mulefat shrubs were planted on the banks. At that time two bridges across Haskell Creek for pedestrians and park service vehicles were built here and a third bridge was built over Haskell Creek near the Los Angeles River in the South Reserve. The creek widening would destroy the three bridges, as well as extensive riparian habitat that supports nesting by threatened and endangered species.

Size of Wildlife Reserve and Portion Impacted:

The EA/IS inaccurately minimizes the impacts of Alternatives 2 and 3 on the Wildlife Reserve.

The map on page 25, *Generalized Land Use*, shows as Wildlife Area (Reserve) only the 48 acre portion south of Burbank Boulevard (the South Reserve) and the 60-acre heart of the reserve (the North Reserve). That would imply that those two parcels comprised the entirety of the 225 acre Wildlife Reserve, whereas they total only around 108 acres.

In fact, the 225 acres also include approximately 60 acres north of Burbank Boulevard, west of Haskell Creek, and east of Woodley Avenue (the West Reserve) that was added to the reserve in 1998. The West Reserve is incorrectly labeled "Woodley Avenue Park" on the map.

The area west of Woodley Avenue to the Los Angeles River that is south of the Model Airplane Field is also part of the official 225 acre Wildlife Reserve. Because model airplanes almost incessantly fly over that area, the wildlife value of the area is reduced, trees and tall shrubs may not be planted there, and people may not walk there because of the danger of being hit by model planes, including model jets. The area also sees fairly frequent brush fires caused by crashes of the model planes.

Further, the map shows areas to the north of the North Reserve as Park and Archery Range. The "Park" area does include the Wildlife Reserve's parking lot, amphitheater and educational staging area, as well as serving as a portion of adjacent Woodley Park. Only a small part of the area labeled Archery Range is archery range. The rest is officially part of the Wildlife Reserve, although serving primarily as part of Woodley Park, landscaped with turf grasses and scattered trees, and used primarily for sports and picnics. (Viewpoint 1 in the EA/IS, labeled as "Facing East from Woodley Park" is in fact part of this portion of the Wildlife

Reserve, to the south of the amphitheater.) We hope that the wildlife value of this area will be enhanced in the future by planting of California native trees and shrubs, but for now it does not have the character of a wildlife reserve.

Thus an on-ramp and off-ramp as would be built if Alternative 2 or 3 were adopted would have a much greater impact on the Wildlife Reserve than depicted in the EA/IS.

Errors in Summary of Impacts Table:

The Summary of Impacts table before numbered pages shows that Alternatives 1, 2 and 3 would all increase noise 2 decibels after construction. We do not believe that this reflects changes to the noise level within the Wildlife Reserve by Alternatives 2 and 3.

The same Summary of Impacts table shows that all three Alternatives would impact approximately 25-30 Coast Live Oak Riparian Trees. Alternative 1 would not have such an impact.

The same Summary of Impacts table shows that all three Alternatives have Potential to impact Burrowing Owl Habitat. Alternative 1 would not have such an impact.

Errors in Table 41, Sensitive Species:

Davidson's Bush Mallow is shown in the table to not have suitable habitat in the project area. In fact, this plant is thriving on Hummingbird Hill, the Burbank Boulevard berm, just west of the tunnel under Burbank Boulevard. This is a short distance from the ramps proposed for Alternatives 2 and 3.

Impacts on Wildlife:

Sensitive Species that have been seen in the exact area of the Wildlife Area that would be removed by Alternatives 2 and 3 include White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Burrowing Owl, and Loggerhead Shrike. Although Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle and Burrowing Owl have only been seen there for short periods of time in the last two decades, this does not eliminate the importance of this area for off-course migrants or wandering immature birds that have preferred this habitat, and only this habitat.

The area impacted by Alternatives 2 and 3 also serves as an essential buffer area for the nearby breeding territory of Least Bell's Vireo, Cooper's Hawk, Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow Warbler, Double-crested Cormorant, Snowy Egret, Blue Grosbeak, and Black-crowned Night Heron. Light and noise pollution from the on- and off-ramp within the Wildlife Reserve may reduce viability of this breeding territory.

As discussed in the Section 4(f)/6(f) Evaluation, page 35:

"Within the Reserve, a number of coastal live oak trees and walnut trees located north of Burbank Blvd. and approximately 18 acres of an area that has been designated as a migratory forage corridor directly adjacent to the I-405 will be permanently impacted by Alternatives 2 and 3. The proposed alternatives may have both permanent and temporary impacts to sensitive species such as burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) and least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*), as well as to other bird species that utilize this area as an important stopping point along their migratory routes. The proposed project may result in permanent habitat loss, which would be subject to minimization measures and compensatory mitigation. Although the project is anticipated to be completed in one season, some impacts primarily those due to an increase in noise to nesting birds and the local avian populations, are anticipated to be temporal prolonged impacts."

The area is still in a state of flux and is still maturing. There is the potential in the very near future for additional "sensitive species" to not only be present, but to breed in the area proposed for construction.

An accident on a freeway ramp could cause hazardous material to spill into the Wildlife Reserve. Cleaning up a hazardous material from the Reserve would be far more problematic than a clean up from a similar accident on a hard-surfaced roadway.

Inadequate Mitigation Measures:

The mitigation measures proposed on page 36 of the EA/IS for Alternatives 2 and 3 is built are inadequate.

The proposal to fund other proposed projects outside the Wildlife Reserve (Bull Creek Restoration Project and Sepulveda Wetlands Park Project) is unacceptable. While we look forward to the Bull Creek Restoration Project, that project will be located almost two miles from the Wildlife Reserve and visits to one will not

typically involve a visit to the other. The Sepulveda Wetlands Park is a proposal by the Bureau of Sanitation that was discarded.

Offsite mitigation to SMMC restoration projects within the San Fernando Valley Watershed would not be acceptable. It is the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve that uniquely affords easily accessible viewing of wildlife and a lake, that is located in the central San Fernando Valley, and that can be visited without hiking steep slopes.

The other mitigation measures mentioned are minimal:

"Develop and implement a restoration plan for the Sepulveda Basin forage area." Such restoration is desirable. However, if an elevated on- and off-ramp are built on and adjacent to the migratory waterfowl forage area, it is unlikely that migratory *Canada Geese* will continue to use the area because they will not have the long sight lines they require.

The other mitigation measures mentioned all amount to planting native trees along the new connector. This is a desirable measure, but does not constitute mitigation for harm to the Wildlife Reserve.

The Environmental Significance Checklist:

The document does not explain why some check marks are in red.

Many items that are checked as Less Than Significant Impact or Less Than Significant With Mitigation Incorporation should have been checked as Potentially Significant Impact. These incorrect categorizations include most items in the BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES section, one in NOISE, and all in MANDATORY FINDINGS OF SIGNIFICANCE.

In closing, we urge Caltrans to discard Alternatives #2 and #3 as these proposals would permanently impair the wildlife reserve. Our organization believes that Alternative #1 offers the best opportunities for preserving open space and valley communities and alleviating our traffic congestion problems. If Alternative #1 is not feasible, we support the No Build Alternative. However, any of the three build Alternatives, including Alternative #1 is unacceptable if it requires widening of Haskell Creek.

Sincerely,

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