

COMMENTS	RESPONSES
<p style="text-align: center;">Comment Letter I27</p> <p>June 19, 2017</p> <p>Patricia Borchmann Volunteer/Member – The Escondido Creek Conservancy (TECC); Volunteer/Member – Escondido Chamber of Citizens (ECOC) 1141 Carrotwood Glen Escondido, CA 92026</p> <p>Ashley Smith, Project Contact: Ashley.Smith2@sdcounty.ca.gov</p> <p>Michelle Irace, Environmental Coordinator: Michelle.Irace@sdcounty.ca.gov</p> <p>RE: Public Comment on Draft EIR for Harmony Grove South - General Plan Amendment/Specific Plan – PDS 2015-GPA-15-002, and Habitat Loss Permit</p> <p>Please accept my personal comments as a Volunteer, and Member of two (2) local organizations: The Escondido Creek Conservancy (TECC), and Escondido Chamber of Citizens (ECOC). I am also a resident in Escondido, and I place high value upon sensitive habitat connectivity and wildlife corridor functions as irreplaceable assets which deserve protection.</p> <p>A primary observation is that unlike Harmony Grove Village, Harmony Grove Village South is proposed to be built on highly functioning wildlife habitat that will be forever destroyed. Additionally, the proposed HGV South project will also cause an extremely compound negative impact by causing permanent fragmentation and degradation of two (2) contiguous protected large Open Space Preserve properties which currently contain highly functioning habitat that is extensively utilized and relied upon by wildlife using existing transportation corridor for animals.</p> <p>Harmony Grove Village South – Relationship to County SD Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP), and Two Contiguous TECC owned Open Space Recreational Preserve Properties</p> <p>Harmony Grove Village South is one of many pending pipeline projects in San Diego County proposing General Plan Amendment (GPA) for high density residential development far beyond adopted General Plan and Community Plan limits and design standards. Because proposed HGV South project is located well outside the defined urban limit, this proposal is an unacceptable encroachment within a targeted conservation plan area that was foreseen as future preservation as mitigation area in a regional system, and a pre-approved mitigation area (PAMA). Completion of the Multi Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) is underway after more than a decade of conservation planning, and the MSCP applies to this property. USFWS comments on Notice of Preparation (NOP) for Draft EIR indicated MSCP criteria would require 72% of this HGV South property to be preserved for perpetual Open Space, however the project design and footprint only preserve 32% of habitat, which is less than half that requirement. Therefore, HGV South project will not only cause permanent loss of highly functioning habitat, the excessive new development will encroach on and cause extremely detrimental compound impact on the two (2) large</p>	<p>Response to Comment I27-1 The County acknowledges these introductory comments; however, they do not raise an issue concerning the environmental analysis or adequacy of the EIR. Please see the responses below to specific comments.</p> <p>Response to Comment I27-2 This is a summary introductory comment that introduces Response to Comment I27-3. The response is provided to that more detailed comment, below.</p> <p>Response to Comment I27-3 Each project proposing a General Plan Amendment (GPA) will receive its own review under CEQA. This response addresses only the Harmony Grove Village South (HGV South) Project.</p> <p>The Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) Draft North County Plan is a draft document in progress.</p> <p>The County’s Habitat Evaluation Model for the MSCP Draft North County Plan is a regional model that should not, and is not intended to, be used to interpret site-specific (i.e., parcel level) biological resources value. Further, the model is based on GIS data generally mapped at a regional scale of 1:24,000 (i.e., 1 inch on the map is equivalent to 24,000 inches on the ground) and also affords greater weight to certain resources that are targeted for conservation in the planning area (e.g., federally endangered Stephens’ kangaroo rat [SKR] [<i>Dipodomys stephensi</i>]) and/or expressed by the large-scale data (e.g., grasslands). The model also does not necessarily take into account current species’ range information. For example, the Model may identify grassland areas as having high value due to their potential association with SKR. SKR is not expected to occur on the Project site due to range restrictions, however, and therefore, the on-site grasslands, do not deserve the heavier weight afforded to them in the model. This is one example of why the Habitat Evaluation Model should not be used to determine the site-specific value of habitat. Similarly, the Project site is identified as having no value or “None” in the County’s California Gnatcatcher Habitat Evaluation Model Results for the MSCP Draft North County Plan, which is contradictory to the site-specific biological resources studies completed for the Proposed Project. Habitat value is addressed extensively in the EIR based on site-specific studies, not only with respect to the habitat that occurs on the Project site itself, but also that which occurs in the local area surrounding the site.</p>

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	<p>The assessment of the habitats within the Project site and habitat connectivity is discussed in Subchapter 2.3, <i>Biological Resources</i>, of the EIR and in the <i>Biological Technical Report</i>, Appendix E. Multiple site visits were conducted from 2014 through July 2017, and detailed vegetation mapping and sensitive species surveys were completed by technical specialists with the appropriate permits. Part of the evaluation has included the functions supported by the habitat. The site has also been visited by representatives of the wildlife/resource agencies, who concurred with the on-site mapping. Please refer to their letter (F1), which indicates substantial concurrence with Project findings (mapping and function classifications).</p> <p>Relative to the discussion regarding on-site preservation recommendations based on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Notice of Preparation letter, following the agency site visit, and an on-the-ground assessment, the letter provided in response to the EIR following review of the full Project analyses acknowledged that although individual sites are the starting point during review of projects with the draft pre-approved mitigation area (PAMA), the:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>...75 percent conservation target is an average across PAMA, where some areas will be conserved at higher levels and others at lower levels.... We then factor in other variables including the importance of the project area to identified biological core and linkage areas within the preserve and the presence of critical biological resources.</i></p> <p>Having seen the site and looked at the resources, the recommendations in the current joint USFWS and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) letter focus on specifics related to off-site mitigation areas rather than proposing retention of existing site conditions.</p> <p>Relative to the comment regarding permanent loss of highly functioning habitat, please refer to the above discussion.</p> <p>Regarding effects on adjacent open space, the County respectfully disagrees. Potential edge effects have been fully discussed in EIR Subchapter 2.3, <i>Biological Resources</i>, under the headings “Core Wildlife Area (Guideline 7),” “Indirect Impacts/Edge Effects (Guideline 8),” Wildlife Access (Guideline 19),” “Local and Regional Wildlife Corridors and Linkages (Guideline 20),”</p>

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	<p>and “Cumulative Impacts to Wildlife Movement and Nursery Sites.” In particular, Guideline 8 discussion specifically addresses increased human activity, domesticated animal effects, introduction of invasive non-native plant species, and night-lighting. The EIR concludes that Project-related long-term impacts to sensitive species from indirect edge effects would be less than significant. In addition, consistent with the requirements of Mitigation Measure M-BI-1a:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Required installation of fencing and signage around the BOS [biological open space], dedication of a BOS easement, protection of the BOS by a limited building zone easement, and implementation of the RMP for the Proposed Project, would further minimize potential edge effects over the long-term (EIR pg. 2.3-33).</i></p> <p>Specifically regarding the area north of the Project, the Project would place residential uses southerly of the northern Project boundary, away from Escondido Creek. There is a substantial buffer between sensitive habitat and Project residential use areas. Specific to Escondido Creek, there are opportunities for enhancing and restoring the current conditions, including areas within lands managed by TECC, which are currently in a degraded state and suffer from both back-up (rather than constant free-flow conditions) where the creek crosses under the at-grade crossing in culverts, and scour, where the momentum of water flowing through the culverts gushes out and hits the creek bed at high velocity. The bridge crossing of the creek would provide for wildlife movement along the creek a route under the County Club Drive crossing (as opposed to over the road) and would prevent associated pollutants on the roadway from washing directly into the creek. During implementation of the bridge, invasive non-native plants would be removed, the creek bed would be regraded to more natural and free-flow conditions, and revegetation with appropriate native species would occur. These actions would be expected to benefit the sensitive (and other) native species in the area.</p> <p>Project implementation would result in over 34 acres of native habitat being conserved as permanent managed biological open space. This land is currently unpreserved and designated for development in the General Plan. Contrary to the comment, the addition of another block of valuable habitat connecting with the existing Del Dios Highlands Preserve would provide for a larger, contiguous block of preserved habitat in the local area.</p>

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	<p>Focused discussion, including the lack of a corridor across the property in the 2009 MSCP Draft North County Plan, is provided under the headings “Habitat Connectivity and Wildlife Corridors,” “Escondido Creek,” and “Del Dios Highlands Preserve/Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve,” on EIR pages 2.3-16 through 2.3-21. Potential impacts are also detailed in discussion of six separate guidelines (Guidelines 19 through 24) the County uses to thoroughly evaluate connectivity issues. These Guidelines focus on access, interference with connectivity, artificial corridors, indirect effects, lack of adequate width, and lack of visual continuity. Discussion is detailed on EIR pages 2.3-38 through 2.3-43. The EIR concludes for each guideline that impacts would be less than significant.</p> <p>Comments in the second paragraph are noted. Please refer to responses for Letters O4a through O4c on behalf of the Escondido Creek Conservancy, and O3a through O3c on behalf of the Elfin Forest – Harmony Grove Town Council, respectively, for responses to their letters.</p>

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It is important to note that even the scaled back HGV South project design still fails conformance with Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) design and urban boundary limits.</p> <p>TECC, The Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove Town Council, and several local residents are investing tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees to hold the County to its original commitments made during the General Plan update process. I fully support the advocacy by this defined coalition to fully protect adjacent Preserve properties, and join effort seeking to preserve the highly functioning habitat located on HGV South property from the incremental encroachment of high density development, habitat fragmentation, because the 111 acres is land which could form an integral component of a permanent viable regional ecosystem.</p> <p>Wildfire Risk Analysis – Harmony Grove Village South – Notice of Preparation Comments</p> <p>The Draft EIR Appendices prepared for this HGV South project include: “Wildland – Urban Interface Fire Emergency Plan”, and “Wildfire Risk Analysis”, which both clearly indicate Harmony Grove Village South project is located in fire prone area identified as extreme fire risk. It wasn't that long ago, when this area suffered devastating fires during 2003, 2007, and 2015 in north San Diego County backcountry repeatedly. Each time, these extreme fire events caused multi-million dollar destruction, regional property damage, loss of homes, farm and ranch structures, injuries, death, endless physical pain, extreme emotional suffering, and almost incalculable real estate losses, and detrimental economic impacts. During emergency evacuations in this region during 2007, traffic congestion was so extreme that residents in San Elijo Hills (San Marcos) were directed to “Shelter in Place”, because emergency evacuation of such large number of residents, and the large number of horse trailers staged to rescue animals in fire prone areas were indeed hazardous because the excessive number of vehicles, and horse trailers trying to evacuate caused traffic to come to a standstill for hours. Narrow Roadways were blocked by vehicles in both directions, so the absence of a separate lane for emergency vehicles for emergency response placed countless residents, ranch and farm owners in extreme jeopardy</p> <p>Another observation is how the analysis prepared in this Draft EIR grossly understates the foreseeable liability how proposed HGV South project will add excessive additional vehicle trips from 453 new luxury homes proposed in this area where residents and emergency responders are already confronted with unacceptable hazards and risks. Evidence is understated in Draft EIR analysis how the inadequate transportation network and narrow roadways already exist in the area that often operates at failed service levels, where secondary emergency access is not available, where emergency evacuation will not be possible and where emergency response capability is already degraded. Therefore, many expect proposed HGV South project will cause further degradation of traffic capacity on local, and regional transportation roadways, which can be expected to make conditions that are already unsafe, even far more hazardous. It would be an extreme public liability jeopardizing emergency response capacity in north San Diego county, and threatening emergency responders by exposure to foreseeable life threatening conditions and unmitigated danger.</p>	<p>Response to Comment I27-4 Comments regarding evacuation conditions during the 2007 wildfires are noted and are not in variance with the EIR’s analysis.</p> <p>The EIR states that the Project is within a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (VHFHSZ) and that fact is referenced in the Project's FPP (DUDEK 2016). Based on its location in a VHFHSZ, the Project is required to provide for a level of planning, ignition-resistant construction materials, access, water availability, fuel modification, and construction methods that have been developed specifically to address and mitigate issues of developing within a VHFHSZ. The Project meets and exceeds these requirements by implementing fire and building codes and exceeding specific codes to provide additional fire protection based on the site, the development plan, and related constraints.</p> <p>Please also see the Global Responses to Fire Hazard Impact Analysis and Adequacy of Emergency Evacuation and Access.</p> <p>Response to Comment I27-5 Please refer to Response to Comment I27-4. Regarding average daily traffic and levels of service, please refer to Subchapter 2.2, <i>Transportation/Traffic</i>, of the EIR. The County requires new proposed projects to assess traffic impacts in their setting to accurately depict potential impacts. In this case, the modeling was conservative as it included projected Harmony Grove Village traffic as already built, and placed Project traffic on top of that in order to isolate and identify Project contributions.</p>

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Additionally the demand for public infrastructure and public services were not offset by Lilac Hills Ranch project design, or offsite road improvements, or availability of public transit to/from employment centers, schools or offset by public infrastructure or offsite improvements proposed by developer.</p> <p>Land Use – Choices by San Diego Voters (Countywide) in 2016 Election – Rejection of Ballot Measure B</p> <p>Another obvious criticism applicable to the Draft EIR prepared for HGV South is how the obsolete analysis entirely overlooks the overwhelming choice San Diego Voters made on Ballot Measure B during 2016 Election, which defeated Lilac Hills Ranch. Action by SD Voters that defeated Ballot Measure B in 2016 brought to the forefront the many technical reasons voters County wide rejected General Plan Amendment (GPA) for extreme density increase. Voters also specifically rejected the Specific Plan location and design because even the revised Lilac Hills plan proposed was an urban sprawl pattern, and because SD voters had already reached a consensus they did not want to see major departures from San Diego's General Plan. Additionally, the Ballot Measure B formed a community-driven consensus among Voters (that applied Countywide), reflecting voter that choices to consistently place extreme value In the Community Plans that were so carefully developed by town councils, community planning groups in community driven process, more than a Planned Development for New Village.areas, distant from public infrastructure, that is proposed and supported by special interests, and investors who do not live here..</p> <p>So Voters in 2016 Election in San Diego sent signal loud and clear how rural character, community identity, visual assets, agricultural uses, and large parcels that provide high value habitat and open space are so clearly valued. San Diego voters reinforced reasons why these assets are to be protected, and preserved through planning processes which require community driven support for conformance findings with Community Plans. Many of those same public stakeholders are expected to apply the same values, logic and desire to uphold the SD General Plan,(just recently updated in 2015), when this GPA for Harmony Grove Village South is considered by Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors.</p> <p>In the Draft EIR for HGV South, there is already evidence contained in comments from public agencies during 2015 when the Notice of Preparation was circulated which indicates the addition of 453 additional homes proposed with HGV South will cause significant unmitigable impacts, for which many do not expect a "Statement of Overriding Considerations" could possibly be justified by mandatory findings. Additionally, many expect it is entirely inappropriate to jeopardize emergency responders during foreseeable emergency events in this fire prone area, or make foreseeable risks even far more hazardous by HGV South project impact of adding 453 additional luxury homes.</p>	<p>Response to Comment I27-6 The comments regarding Lilac Hills Ranch are noted, but do not pertain to the HGV South Project environmental analysis and no response is required.</p> <p>Response to Comment I27-7 See Response to Comment I27-6. The Proposed Project is also distinguishable from “new village areas” as it is adjacent to an existing village; please see Global Response to Project Consistency with General Plan Policy LU-1.4.</p> <p>Environmental impacts associated with HGV South are detailed in the thorough EIR prepared for the Project, based on analyses prepared by technical specialists approved by the County for technical review. The only impacts identified as unmitigated are identified in Subchapters 2.1, <i>Aesthetics</i>, and 2.2, <i>Transportation/Traffic</i>, and 2.6, <i>Air Quality</i>; with full explanations of why those impacts would occur and when they would be mitigated. The aesthetics impact would resolve due to passage of time based on temporary construction impacts. The traffic and air quality impacts are related to actions by other CEQA agencies that are beyond the purview of the County and would be solved by implementation of mitigation measures within the city of Escondido following City approval of proposed mitigation measures for traffic and by use of updated planning data provided by the County to SANDAG and the San Diego Air Pollution Control District). Please see Sections 2.1.6, 2.2.7, and 2.6.6 of the EIR, respectively. The County does not agree that the Project would jeopardize emergency responders or make foreseeable risks more hazardous.</p> <p>Please see Global Responses to Fire Hazards Impact Analysis and Adequacy of Emergency Evacuation and Access.</p>

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