

COMMENTS

RESPONSES



P.O. Box 460791
 Escondido, CA 92046-0791
 (760) 471-9354

June 15, 2015

RE: VALIANO SPECIFIC PLAN PDS2013-SP-13-001, PDS2013-GPA-13-001, PDS2013-REZ-13-001, PDS2013-TM-5575, PDS2014-MUP-14-019, PDS2013-STP-13-003, PDS2013-ER-13-08-002 Draft Environmental Impact Report.

Dear Ms. Ehsan,

The mission of The Escondido Creek Conservancy (TECC) is to preserve and restore the Escondido Creek watershed. Our vision is that the watershed will become a model of vibrant urban communities and viable natural ecosystems thriving together. To accomplish this requires sound planning and development sensitive to, and appreciative of, our natural resources. Unfortunately the Valiano project fails this test.

TECC does not dispute the need for more housing. We support, in general, the current County General Plan especially those aspects that came together as a result of many years of careful discussions and are supported by thoughtful studies and community consensus. TECC does oppose sprawl development that produces tremendous negative impacts in our communities and diminishes our quality of life, natural habitats and transportation systems, while increasing the cost of public services. We oppose any project that includes unmitigated impacts.

Biology 4.2.1

Residents adjacent to the Valiano property regularly observe significant wildlife foraging, including deer, bobcats, and coyotes. While much of site is impacted by fallowed agriculture, it still has habitat value, which, left alone or restored, would only improve. We must recognize that keeping common species common is one of the keys to protecting complete ecosystems and preserving threatened and endangered species.

The effects of a project of this size and design would negatively impact adjacent rural properties that are also utilized by both common and threatened species. How will off site impacts be addressed in the Final EIR?

The open spaces proposed on the project site are too narrow, fragmented, and too close to development. They would be so adversely degraded from edge effects that they would not function as viable habitat.

The Escondido Creek Conservancy (TECC) is a non-profit, public benefit corporation whose mission is to protect and restore the Escondido Creek watershed.

O-1 This comment is an introduction to comments that follow. No further response is required.

O-2a The comment expresses the opinions of the commenter, but is not at variance with the environmental document; therefore, no further response is required.

O-2b The comment refers to sprawl development with various impacts. As stated in multiple responses, the Project has a clustered design and location near jobs and transit, and thus does not constitute sprawl development. See EIR Subchapter 2.4 for a discussion of impacts and mitigation for natural habitats, 2.8 for transportation systems, and Section 3.1.7 for impacts to public services.

O-2c The comment expresses the opinions of the commenter, but does not raise an environmental issue within the meaning of CEQA; therefore, no further response is required.

O-3 The comment indicates the Project has value for wildlife species such as deer, bobcats, and coyotes. The Project site would continue to provide habitat for deer, bobcats, and coyotes. See Responses K-32 and K-45 regarding wildlife habitat and movement on the Project site. Habitat mitigation would be provided for Project impacts to vegetation communities pursuant to County and Resource Agency requirements. Off-site mitigation for the Project would provide superior habitat connectivity and long-term preservation value, which would directly benefit many wildlife species.

O-4 The comment states that the Project will impact off-site habitat. Adjacent rural properties are not designated open space areas or future proposed PAMA. Although wildlife may utilize these properties, they, along with the Project site, are not considered priority areas for conservation. The Project would not directly impact off-site habitat.

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0-5 Biological open space on site is for avoidance, not mitigation, and as such is not required to be connected. See Response K-32 for further discussion of wildlife movement through the site.

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A few of these edge effects, are as follows:

O-6 1. Introduction of invasive exotic vegetation inadvertently carried in from bikes, people, animals or spread from backyards or fuel modification zones adjacent to the park wild land. The plant pallet for the development, including pallets for the future homebuyers, should exclude any species listed by Cal-IPC, ASLA or the Los Angeles Regional Invasive Plant Guide as invasive. How will this be addressed in the Final EIR?

O-7 2. Higher frequency and severity of fire (fires are a natural process but when too frequent can harm the environment). How will this issue be addressed in the Final EIR?

O-8 3. Companion animals (pets) which can act as predators of and competitors with native wildlife, as well as vectors for disease. How will the impacts of free ranging domestic animals be addressed in the Final EIR?

O-9 4. Use and creation of undesignated trails can significantly degrade the natural environment. How will the impacts of undesignated trails be addressed in the Final EIR?

O-10 5. Influence on earth systems, such as solar radiation, soil richness and erosion, wind damage, hydrologic cycle, and light and water pollution, can affect the natural environment. How does the EIR address these cumulative impacts on the open space and nearby areas?

O-11 6. Loss of foraging habitat. Natural predators utilize open areas and old agricultural fields for finding food. How does the EIR propose to mitigate these impacts?

O-12 7. Preserved Open Space. TECC has facilitated the acquisition of over 2,000 acres of some of the most bio-diverse, and sensitive habitats, in San Diego County. The closest property, a 500 acre parcel contiguous with over 3,000 additional acres, with sensitive archeological sites as well, is .8 miles from this project. Siting a project with this many residents so near these preserved properties was not anticipated in light of the planning process that resulted in Harmony Grove Village. How will the final EIR address the impacts of the new residents on the nearby existing preserved open space?

Agriculture 4.2.2

O-13 This project would result in the loss of approximately 100 acres of agricultural lands. The DIER proposes to place 36+ acres in agricultural preserve at the north end of the project property.

O-6 The comment requests that invasive species be addressed in the EIR. The EIR addresses invasive species. Project landscaping would exclude invasive species listed by Cal-IPC. This is noted on the conceptual landscape plan, as well as in Sections 2.4.2 and 7.2.5 of the EIR and Section 2.2.3 of the Specific Plan.

O-7 The comment lists higher frequency and severity of fires as an expected edge effect of the Project on on-site open space. The Project incorporates FMZs pursuant to County and Fire Marshal requirements. This and other measures would manage fire risk, as explained in Response K-65.

O-8 The comment raises pets as an edge effect. As noted in the EIR, barrier type fencing would be constructed around biological open space and signs would be posted in several locations along the barrier type fencing to deter human access. These signs also would alert homeowners that pets are not allowed in the biological open space areas. Section 2.4.2 of the EIR acknowledges that domestic predators have potential to harm native wildlife, and that the Project site is adjacent to existing residential development and already subject to some level of disturbance and predation by domestic animals. The Project would provide homeowner disclosures to homebuyers alerting them of the requirements to keep pets (and people) out of the biological open space areas and to keep pets on leash in public areas, including trails.

O-9 The comment concerns the use and creation of undesignated trails as an edge effect. Use and creation of undesignated trails would be discouraged through the use of signage and fencing of biological open space areas. Numerous designated trails, both public and private, are proposed as part of the Project, accommodating trail users and relieving the pressure to create unauthorized trails.

O-10 The comment raises a number of potential cumulative impacts. The EIR analyzes cumulative impacts on all subject areas required by CEQA.

O-11 The comment enquires about how the loss of raptor foraging would be mitigated. Mitigation for loss of foraging habitat would occur through habitat mitigation at ratios consistent with County guidelines. See Mitigation Measures M-BI-1a and b in Section 2.4.5 of the EIR.

O-12 The commenter is concerned that the Project will affect preserved lands in the area (not adjacent). The viability of off-site conserved lands as habitat and movement corridors for wildlife would not be affected by the Project as they are part of larger, connected open space areas that do not extend across the Project site.

- 0-13 The Project Description information provided in this comment is generally accurate, although the following clarifications/corrections are provided:
- It is assumed that the described loss of "... approximately 100 acres of agricultural lands" is referring to the on-site agricultural operations, which actually encompass approximately 117.4 acres of avocado orchards and apiary sites (with portions of these uses impacted by the 2014 wildfire, see Response K-23).
 - The noted 36+ acre area at the north end of the Project site is actually proposed as an agricultural easement, rather than an agricultural preserve as stated in this comment. The term agricultural preserve has a specific definition related to the County's ability to designate appropriate areas as agricultural preserves (i.e., areas that are suitable for Williamson Act designation), and is not applicable to the proposed 35.4-acre agricultural easement included as part of the Proposed Project design.

Because this comment is not at variance with the EIR analysis or related considerations, no additional response is required.

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O-14 It appears the Valiano agricultural preserve is being set up with the assumption that the agricultural operation will be financially self-sustaining. Given the high cost of water, it is quite likely that the agricultural operations will not be sustainable, leaving the HOA with financial responsibility for long term management.

O-14 It should be noted this preserve may not lend itself to conversion to habitat if the HOA determined that management was too intensive since the area is at the north end of the project and as a result is too isolated from a habitat perspective.

How will the final EIR address the likely outcome of the HOA holding an unsustainable agricultural preserve?

Fire Protection 5.4/Circulation Plan 3.0

O-15 Wildland fire is a natural event in chaparral. However the frequency and intensity of fires in San Diego County have increased well beyond the natural cycle due to human activity. This is a threat to the eco-system and to the residents of Eden Valley and surrounding communities and cities.

O-16a The document only mentions the Cocos fire of 2014 in passing and does not detail what occurred during that incident. Evacuation out of San Elijo Hills, Elfin Forest, Eden Valley, and Harmony Grove was not possible for many residents creating a significant safety issue (<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/jun/07/san-elijo-traffic-review-cocos-fire-san-marcos/>). Adding yet more housing in a valley with limited two lane roads that connect to level service F intersections in the city of Escondido will only make the situation worse. The Final EIR should address the fire evacuation situation in light of the Cocos Fire experience. How will residents (existing and new) safely flee another inevitable wildfire? How will livestock be evacuated? Shouldn't shelter in place building standards be required not only for the structures in this development, but also for the existing residential structures in Eden Valley?

O-17 In conclusion, the project should be built to existing general plan densities if that can be done without significant, unmitigated impacts to the surrounding environment and communities.

Sincerely,



Kevin Barnard
President

O-14 The comment indicates that the proposed on-site agricultural easement will not be sustainable, and also too isolated to revert to habitat. See Response I-69a for information related to the terms, funding and operational considerations associated with the proposed 35.4-acre on-site agricultural easement. The northwestern portion of the site does contain biological open space and has good habitat connectivity as discussed in the Subchapter 2.4 of the EIR.

O-15 The comment is concerned with the threat of wildfire. See Response I-59 for how the Project would improve fire safety.

O-16a The commenter is concerned with the Cocos fire and evacuation during wildfires. See Response K-59 regarding the Cocos Fire. See Topical Response: Fire/Evacuations regarding evacuations.

O-16b The commenter is concerned with evacuation of livestock and suggests shelter in place construction. New developments are planned to be very defensible, and in the unlikely event that time does not permit safe evacuation, these new developments would be very safe places to find temporary refuge. See Response I-62 regarding evacuation of animals. In the event a wildfire occurs in the immediate vicinity with little to no time to evacuate, the Incident Command will make a determination on site/on scene if temporary safe refuge of residents and animals would be appropriate or warranted. The Incident Command does have the decision and option that temporary safe refuge in pre-determined safety zones could be an option.

O-17 The comment expresses the opinions of the commenter, but is not at variance with the environmental document; therefore, no further response is required.