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June 1, 2016

Mr. Steve Rodriguez  
County of Santa Barbara  
Planning and Development Department  
Development Review - North  
624 W. Foster Road, Suite C,  
Santa Maria, 93455

Reference: Oak Hills Estates Project – Peer Review of Design Guidelines (RECON Number 8147)

Dear Mr. Rodriguez:

RECON has reviewed the design guidelines dated June 2015, for the Oak Hills Estates Project (project) located in Vandenberg Village, Santa Barbara County, California. RECON reviewed the guidelines to determine their consistency with adopted County plans and policies to support the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) analysis of aesthetic impacts, and to identify the potential for significant aesthetic impacts to result from application of the guidelines.

In general, the design guidelines document contains good information that, when implemented, will help to avoid or minimize the project's potential effects. In order to strengthen the guidelines, we offer the following comments and recommendations for your consideration:

#### **A. General Overview**

##### **▪ Consistency with County of Santa Barbara Policies, Regulations, and Guidelines**

**Administration:** These design guidelines are intended to function as a part of the Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs). Generally, a CC&R document may be implemented and revised from time to time by the Homeowner's Association (HOA). It may be helpful to clarify whether, in addition to design review of individual residences, there is a requirement that revisions to these Design Guidelines would undergo County review for consistency with project conditions of approval. This would apply until buildout of the lots. After buildout, changes to the HOA plant list, should be reviewed by a qualified botanist to ensure compatibility with the adjacent Burton Mesa Preserve.

**County Guidelines and California Environmental Quality Act Criteria:** The design guidelines generally address issues related to visual resources (e.g., incompatibility with surrounding uses, removal of significant amounts of vegetation, loss of important open space, substantial alteration of natural character, lack of adequate landscaping, extensive grading visible from public areas). However, it may be helpful to include a reference to the visual impact criteria so that developers understand the importance and regulatory context of following these guidelines.

**County Land Use and Development Code, Chapter 35:** Consider the addition of a statement such as, "Nothing in these design guidelines shall be construed to suggest or authorize deviations from meeting the minimum requirements and residential design review procedures specified by the County Land Use and Development Code."

## **B. Site Context and Character**

- **Compatibility with surrounding neighborhood and adjacent natural open space (Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve):** The design guidelines acknowledge the unique context of the proposed subdivision, and the intent to develop a neighborhood “with a distinct rural estate character” while “responding sensitively to the natural features” of the site and adjacent preserve lands.

Detailed attention in the design guidelines should be specifically given to the treatment and visual appearance of the two retention basins. These are shown immediately next to the roadway, and will be visible not only to residents and persons using Oak Hill Drive but also to residents of homes to the south of Oak Hills Estates. These basins should have a visually aesthetic appearance and provide biological value/habitat, as well as functioning to retain stormwater. Careful design is especially important because of the visual impact criteria regarding alteration of natural character, adequate landscaping, and grading visible from public areas.

- **Resource Protection:** Resource protection is addressed by the mapping of existing vegetation and watercourses, and by restrictions on mass grading. Although setback areas are identified, and the Site Plan graphic (p.6.) implies a building envelope with each lot, this is not specified. If these are in fact building envelopes, that should be clearly shown and labeled, and language added to the guidelines to clarify that no grading is allowed outside of the building envelope. Labels and a legend should be added to the site plan. Additional emphasis should be placed on minimizing grading on individual lots (see comment below under Site Design).
- **Landscaping and Irrigation:** The Landscape Design section is fairly detailed and clear, providing useful direction to designers and developers. The plant palette could be expanded to include other plants on the County-approved WUCOLS IV Plant List. Additionally, a list of prohibited plants should also be provided, to avoid the establishment and spread of species that would be detrimental to the natural habitats in the adjacent preserve, and/or problematic from a fire safety perspective.
- **Fire Safety:** Fire safety is addressed under Section IV, Landscape Design, and the requirement to adhere to the County’s Defensible Space Standards are clear. Per the above comment, it would be helpful to include additional species that could be planted within the Defensible Space area.
- **Relationship to the Open Space Management Plan:** The design guidelines should reflect how the issue of plant and habitat mitigation in fuel management zones is resolved, as it pertains to revegetation species, planting acorns, irrigation, and long-term maintenance.

## **C. Specific Comments**

The following are more specific comments and recommendations for the design guidelines for this project:

1. Title: Consider changing title to “Oak Hills Estates: Site Design and Construction Guidelines,” with the secondary title revised to read “A guide for the site sensitive development of residential properties to promote aesthetic and ecological compatibility with the natural landscape, existing community, and the adjacent Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve.” Also, add the location: North Vandenberg Village, Santa Barbara County, California.
2. Throughout: where the word “location” infers siting, use the word siting (e.g., page 1. I.2.)
3. Administration and Enforcement, page 2: Consider adding “landscape renovations” to the list of actions triggering the design review process.

4. Plan Submittal Requirements, page 3: Consider requiring that a landscape plan be included in the preliminary design package submittal, not just for those lots adjacent to open space, and that a landscape plan also be included in the final construction document package for all lots.
5. Site Design: Add labels to the siting concept sketch and the Site Plan graphic. Under Objectives, page 5, additional emphasis should be placed on minimizing grading on individual lots and incorporating other Low Impact Design (LID) techniques detailed in item 1, in the County Project Clean Water letter dated March 5, 2015. Appropriate LID techniques include stormwater management as an aesthetic landscape element (bio swales) use of bioretention or landscape dispersal, reducing size of impervious surfaces, use of permeable paving, and careful design of grading and slopes. Future development of individual lots will need to address compatibility with drainage and LID facilities.
6. Add language requiring the clear demarcation of allowed limits of grading on all plans (site plan, building plans, landscape plans), as well as on-site during construction. Consider adding limits on the maximum allowed vertical and horizontal extent of cut and fill slopes consistent with the County comprehensive plan land use element. The land use element calls for preservation of the natural backdrop of the area through controls on hillside grading over 30 percent and defines hillsides as land with slopes over 20 percent. Add a requirement to stockpile topsoil prior to excavation for reuse as cover over landscaped areas to facilitate establishment of vegetation.
7. Landscape Design:
  - In general, the intent would be strengthened by using more specific language throughout. For example:
    - Revise Objective 11 to expand intent: e.g., “Protect any on-site existing oak trees and other sensitive native plants communities retained by the approved subdivision by ~~sensible~~ careful and deliberate siting of homes, driveways and outdoor use areas, and by avoiding unnecessary site disturbance.
    - Revise Unifying Elements a. to clarify intent: e.g., “~~Provision Inclusion of yard trees harmonious with Coast Live Oak and European Olive (fruitless)~~ compatible with the adjacent oak woodland and chaparral habitat plant community.
  - Additional sketches and/or photographs would give examples and help clarify intent for this section.
  - Add the following note: “Full compliance with the measures outlined in the approved Open Space Management Plan and Tree Replacement Plan is required.”
  - Add labels and a legend to Fire Safety Plan.
  - Irrigation: add requirement that irrigation system components must be installed underground (i.e., no aboveground piping or valves.)
  - Lighting: Add the following to Intent, “Outdoor lighting should be designed and installed so that the light source is not visible. Illumination should be minimal and should not flood the landscape with excessive light or spill into adjacent properties or the Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve. Uplighting for landscaping and/or structures should not be utilized.”

8. Plant Palette:

- Remove the use of the non-native European olive trees on the suggested plant palette for this subdivision, which is immediately adjacent to the Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve.
- Include additional plant species materials that are ecologically compatible with, and/or will not negatively affect the adjacent Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve. Include both common and botanical names for all plant species and identify whether native or ornamental (i.e., varietals, such as Canyon Prince (*Leymus condensatus*), are not native plants and should be identified as ornamentals.)
- Include a table that lists prohibited invasive exotic species commonly planted in the Santa Barbara area, with corresponding native plants species that can be recommended as good alternatives for this project.

9. Trail: A trail is shown on drawings but is not discussed. If included in the site plan, this element will require careful consideration in terms of alignment, slopes, grading, drainage, surface material, accessibility, and allowed users. Additionally, the design guidelines and CC&Rs need to address the extent to which residents will be allowed to access the trail (and other areas of the open space and adjacent Reserve) from their individual properties. When open access from individual properties is allowed in subdivisions, it can easily result in trampling of vegetation, multiple spur trails, and general degradation of biological values, and visual quality.

If you have any questions regarding the comments made in this peer review, or if we can be of further service, please call Lori Woods (805) 928-7907, ext. 200, or Bret McNulty at ext.187..

Sincerely,



Lori Woods  
Landscape Architect, Visual Analyst



Bret McNulty  
Central Coast Manager

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