

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

RAMIREZ CANYON PARK
5750 RAMIREZ CANYON ROAD
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA 90265
PHONE (310) 589-3200
FAX (310) 589-3207



August 6, 2004

The Honorable Cindy Miscikowski
Los Angeles City Council
200 North Spring Street, Room 415
Los Angeles, California 90012

Public Trail Access on Canyonback Road

Dear Councilmember Miscikowski:

The recent uproar over the proposed closure and gating of Canyonback Road has brought out issues and misconceptions that the Conservancy staff needs to bring to the community's attention. For the record, our planning staff had acknowledged some type of a nighttime closure of Canyonback Road provided that excellent provision was made for full public use of the street as a daytime trail and trailhead parking site. Several months ago we also consented to four dedicated street parking spaces at the north end of Canyonback and an easement in favor of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) over both the parking spaces and the length of Canyonback. However, no formal plans or written procedures have ever been submitted to the Conservancy, and Conservancy staff has never confirmed that satisfactory arrangements have been met to provide public access to the Santa Monica Mountains trail system as directed by the April 4, 2003 amending motion.

The Canyonback Trail is part of a large trail system on a combination of County Sanitation Districts, Conservancy, MRCA, City, and California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) properties known as Big Wild. Many people use the Big Wild trail system as a circuit that requires nighttime travel along Canyonback. State Parks, the largest landowner in Big Wild, does not have night closures of its parkland, and to my knowledge none of the other government entities within the Big Wild restrict nighttime trail use, other than the Conservancy and MRCA. Historically the MRCA rangers have not enforced park hours in many portions of the trail circuit because of this well-established, legitimate post-sunset trail use that crosses jurisdictional boundaries. The attached Memorandum from MRCA Chief Ranger Walt Young addresses his specific operational concerns with nighttime closure of the street. These concerns include people being stranded on the wrong side of the gate after traversing many miles of trails, and other public safety issues.

Likewise, the outpouring of community concern regarding loss of nighttime use of Canyonback for trail connection and staging has been heard loud and clear. Unfortunately, neither the

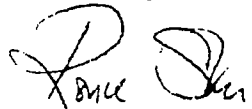
Hon. Cindy Miscikowski
August 6, 2004
Page 2

MRCA ranger staff nor the recreational constituents were consulted in coming to the earlier decision to accept nighttime closure of the road even though it seemed consistent and reasonable to our planning staff at the time. The sum of these concerns needs to be addressed. We look forward to such a process with your office and the whole of the community.

One further and important point of clarification: The imposition and intimidation to legitimate public parkland trail users, posed by having to push a button to seek a remotely-stationed security guard's permission to enter the street, is not acceptable to the Conservancy. The decade-old example of a similar "check through the guard first" protocol at Fossil Ridge Park in Sherman Oaks reveals the intractable flaws of such a system. The only gate design that the Conservancy would consider is one in which foot, bicycle, and equestrian use can occur unimpeded by any person, electronic device, or latching system. The entire length of the trail system on Canyonback, including the interface with County Sanitation District land at the north end of the street must be designed to encourage and advertise the availability of the trail for public use.

We understand that in any event the City Attorney is reviewing the legality of street closure. If it turns out that the street vacation *is* a viable option for the Crown Homeowners Association, we stand ready to work with all parties involved to forge a solution, but one that does not diminish established recreational opportunities and public access to public resources.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rorie Skei". The signature is stylized and written in cursive.

RORIE SKEI
Chief Deputy Director

Enclosure (1)



MOUNTAINS RECREATION & CONSERVATION AUTHORITY
Sooky Goldman Nature Center
2600 Franklin Canyon Drive
Beverly Hills, California 90210
Phone (310) 858-7272 Fax (310) 858-7212

MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 5, 2004
TO: Joseph T. Edmiston FAICP, Ronie Skei, Paul Edelman
FROM: Walt Young
RE: Proposed gate closure of Canyonback Trail

It has come to my attention that there is a proposal to erect a gate on the Canyonback Trail that would block pedestrian travel on the trail after dark. This gate, if erected, will pose a severe threat to public safety.

As you know, the Canyonback Trail is part of a larger trail system located in an area commonly referred to as the Big Wild. Park visitors use this trail system to travel through various parks that are managed by a variety of public agencies. It is not uncommon for park visitors to complete large hiking and biking loops within the Big Wild. Many of the public entities that manage the open space within the Big Wild do not restrict hours of operation. As such, we as an Agency do not enforce nighttime restrictions for park visitors who are clearly traveling through our property for the purposes of completing their journey.

Closing the Canyonback Trail at night will have public safety implications on both a micro and macro basis. I can well imagine individuals who will be separated from their vehicle by the closed gate, and who will not have sufficient water or energy to reverse course and hike to an unfamiliar trailhead. Worse yet, the temptation to travel cross-country in unfamiliar terrain may be irresistible, leading to a backcountry tragedy.

Lastly, with the ever-present threat of wildfire, I cannot imagine taking any action which would prevent hikers from freely traveling in the backcountry. Thirty years of public safety experience in Search & Rescue, Wildland Firefighting and Law Enforcement as a Park Ranger leaves me no doubt that this proposal is a bad idea.