

October 5, 2004

Mr. Nicholas Hendricks
Environmental Review Coordinator
Department of City Planning
200 N. Spring St., Room 763
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Mr. Hendricks:

I am writing to provide comments from the Los Angeles Conservancy on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) Supplement for the Chase Knolls Apartments project.

The Los Angeles Conservancy is the largest local historic preservation organization in the United States, with over 8,500 household members throughout the Los Angeles area. In 2000, the Conservancy was a primary proponent of Chase Knolls' designation as a Historic-Cultural Monument and has worked closely with tenants and neighbors to preserve and revitalize this significant residential community.

Chase Knolls Apartments is one of Los Angeles' most significant multi-family complexes of its type – the large garden apartment complex shaped by the principles of the “Garden City” movement. It is also one of the most significant landmarks of the San Fernando Valley, which has very few Historic-Cultural Monuments. After the site's designation as a City Monument, its eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places was confirmed by the National Park Service. Chase Knolls' owners are also benefiting from the single-largest Mills Act property tax reduction ever granted to any historic property in Los Angeles. Given its significance and unique status, the City's decision-makers have a special obligation to ensure beyond any possible doubt that any alterations to Chase Knolls minimize any impacts on the site's overall character.

The Conservancy wishes to acknowledge that the developer has incorporated positive adjustments to the initial site plan in an attempt to minimize the project's impacts. These changes include the relocation of the proposed swimming pool from one of the central courtyards to a more appropriate location adjacent to a new structure. The Conservancy also acknowledges that the Secretary of Interior's Standards do not preclude the addition of new units to the Chase Knolls complex.

Furthermore, the Conservancy appreciates the additional progress that has been made since the original release of the DEIR. The DEIR Supplement does successfully preserve the character of Chase Knolls' northern edge by retaining the carports and attached screening walls along Huston Street.

While the State Office of Historic Preservation and the National Park Service have reached preliminary conclusions that the project may meet the Secretary of Interior's Standards, it is important to point that the Park Service has reiterated that the City of Los Angeles must conduct its own independent review of Standards compliance. The State and Federal agencies were reviewing the project for tax credit compliance, a process that is relatively closed to public input. These reviewing agencies heard no public testimony as to why the project may, in fact, not be in full compliance with the Standards.

In addition, the State and Federal findings were contingent upon the submission of detailed landscaping plans that, to date, have not been submitted. The DEIR Supplement considers the submission of the landscape plans as a "mitigation measure", which assumes that compliance with the Standards has already been established. But, in fact, because many of Chase Knolls' character-defining features are landscape elements, it is impossible to answer the threshold question of Standards compliance without carefully reviewing landscape plans. If the landscape plans reveal adverse impacts to character-defining landscape features of Chase Knolls, the project will not be in compliance. This review must take place as part of the overall review of the EIR – not just as an after-thought following final certification.

The Conservancy therefore requests that, prior to certification of the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR), the Cultural Heritage Commission, as the City's experts in historic preservation, should conduct a public hearing in the community to review in greater detail whether the project is in compliance with the Standards.

Because much of the Chase Knolls project description remains largely unchanged from the DEIR, our comments on the Supplement will largely repeat or echo the comments provided on the earlier document.

Overall, the Conservancy still believes that the current proposal significantly "pushes the envelope": its proposed changes are simply too intensive and dramatic to be considered a sensitive handling of a historic apartment complex. The Conservancy has several concerns about the DEIR Supplement and its analysis of impacts on the historic resource. We believe that additional refinements to the project will be necessary to better ensure compliance with the Secretary of Interior's Standards.

1) The scale and massing of the proposed new buildings is not compatible with the historic site plan of Chase Knolls.

The scale and massing of the new buildings is not sufficiently consistent with Chase Knolls' historic architecture and overall site planning. The new structures will be larger than the scale of the historic buildings, making the new development a dominant site feature, rather than remaining subordinate to the historic architecture.

The Secretary of Interior's Standards recommend that new additions to historic sites should be handled in a manner "limiting its size and scale in relationship to the historic building." Here, the proposed new buildings are taller than the existing structures. The new architecture

should step down to the original architecture. This would reflect the original design, where the density progression begins with low-scale buildings at the edges, culminating in the largest structures around the site's dominant courtyards.

Although the DEIR Supplement attempts to justify the project by comparing it repeatedly with Legacy Partners' earlier plan or the earlier project description in the DEIR, it glosses over a rather unfavorable comparison addressing scale and massing. Legacy's proposal sensitively inserted seven modest buildings into the fabric of Chase Knolls, with a total of only 47 units (six or seven units per building). By contrast, this proposed project less sensitively plops six large buildings with 141 units (an average of 23.5 units per building) amidst this unique and historic setting.

2) The design and configuration of the new structures are also incompatible with Chase Knolls' historic design.

The new structures are designed as three-story, conventional apartment building structures, over parking. Instead of being entered and existed off of grand public spaces and semi-private open spaces, as occurs at Chase Knolls' other 260 units, the new buildings will be oriented internally, into interior, double-loaded corridors. The new units will therefore create a living experience and pedestrian progression that is completely divorced and unrelated to the basic experience of tenants in the historic portion of the complex.

The massive size of the new structures also ensures that they physically intrude on the historic architecture of Chase Knolls. In many cases, the new buildings create a huge new wall, very close to the complex's historic structures. The placement of these structures also eliminates the "backyard" spaces for many of the historic units, spaces that help define the complex's pattern of public and semi-private open spaces. By scaling back the size of the new buildings, these units may be reconfigured in a manner that is more consistent with the complex's historic layout and minimize the intrusion on the existing units.

3) The DEIR Supplement dropped the DEIR's analysis of the gating of the Chase Knolls property. Because the fencing plan was submitted, approved, and installed separately, it constitutes impermissible "piecemealing" under CEQA.

The DEIR had made brief mention that the proposed project will add "a fence, with multiple gates, around the perimeter of the property." The DEIR Supplement now drops any mention of the gating because this single element of the project has been approved and actually installed during this interim period.

While the Conservancy agrees that this may be a reversible alteration, transforming Chase Knolls into a gated community does dramatically change the underlying historic character of the complex. Part of the ingenious site plan and landscape design of Chase Knolls is found in the complex's relationship with the single-family neighborhood to its north, integrating itself as seamlessly as possible, in noted contrast to most multi-family developments. The gating of Chase Knolls will irreversibly begin to change this physical and psychological relationship that is part of the complex's genius and appeal.

While justifying this gating as a method of addressing security concerns, this proposal otherwise undermines long-established principles of “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design” (CPTED) by creating visual intrusions and interruptions that prevent more natural surveillance by neighbors (often termed as “eyes on the street”).

Although the gating plan was to be analyzed through the EIR process and was part of the original project description, it was approved separately, outside of the context of the EIR. This process constitutes an impermissible segmenting or “piecemealing” of the project under CEQA. Because the fencing is an integral part of the original overall plan and should have been subject to public comment, the Cultural Heritage Commission should re-consider this element of the plan in conducting its own review of the project.

4) The DEIR fails to evaluate a reasonable range of alternatives that mitigate impacts of the proposed project.

The DEIR and DEIR Supplement fail to meet CEQA’s requirements to consider a full range of alternatives. Incredibly, the documents examine only one real alternative (aside from the obligatory “No Project” alternative): the proposal previously advanced by Legacy Partners. The Legacy alternative, however, is truly a “straw man” alternative because, unlike most “reduced project” alternatives, it actually contains more intensive environmental impacts.

The Final EIR should study a true “reduced project” alternative that is meant to reduce density and minimize overall project impacts. This true “reduced project” alternative would retain TransAction’s other project refinements: moving the swimming pool out of the main courtyards, reducing the loss of trees, and developing one- and two-bedroom units rather than three-bedroom townhome units.

Similarly, the Final EIR should study another alternative: a “rehabilitation” option that thoroughly reinvests in the historic architecture and design of the site, consistent with the usual obligations of a Mills Act contract. The “No Project” alternative does not address the possibility of historic rehabilitation. Shockingly, the “No Project” alternative quickly diverges to analyze the complete demolition of the complex, arguing that existing conditions could not be maintained past the ten years of the Mills Act contract. Nowhere does the DEIR analyze the feasibility of rehabilitating the structures in a manner consistent with other successful historic complexes such as Village Green or Park La Brea. The Final EIR must address this shortcoming.

5) Chase Knolls’ owners are benefiting from the single largest Mills Act contract in City of Los Angeles history. The proposed project should therefore be held to the highest, most stringent standards.

In 2001, after Legacy Partners’ proposed demolition plans were forestalled by the Historic-Cultural Monument designation, the Conservancy supported a special exemption for Legacy to obtain a Mills Act contract in a hearing before the Cultural Heritage Commission. The Mills Act, a State law implemented by local governments, entitles an owner of designated

historic properties to a significant reduction in property taxes if the owner agrees to maintain the property in accordance with the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation for a ten-year period.

The contract required a special exemption from the full Commission because it dramatically exceeded the \$1.5 million property valuation cap on Mills Act contracts in the City of Los Angeles (the property was worth approximately 15 times that amount). In recommending an exemption at this unprecedented level, Cultural Affairs Department staff noted that the contract would ensure the preservation of a property that had been significantly and recently threatened.

The Conservancy is therefore greatly dismayed that property owners who are benefiting from the largest historic preservation tax break in the entire City of Los Angeles would propose dramatic alterations to the property, while not even studying a full historic rehabilitation scheme in the Draft EIR.

Conclusions

The Conservancy urges the City Planning Department and City decision-makers to conduct its own, thorough review of the project, incorporating detailed public input, to ensure compliance with the Secretary of Interior's Standards. We look forward to working with all parties to craft a scaled-down version of the proposed project that preserves the architectural and design integrity of the beautiful, significant Chase Knolls property. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ken Bernstein
Director of Preservation Issues