

CITY OF SANTA CLARITA
STAFF REPORT
MASTER CASE NO. 10-150
GENERAL PLAN AMENDMENT 10-003, PREZONE NO. 10-002

DATE: March 1, 2011

TO: Chairperson Burkhart and Members of the Planning Commission

FROM: Paul D. Brotzman, Director of Community Development
Jeff Hogan, AICP, Interim Planning Manager

CASE PLANNER: Ben Jarvis, Associate Planner

APPLICANT: City of Santa Clarita

REQUEST: This is a request for a General Plan Amendment (GPA) and Prezone (PRZ) of approximately 807 acres of land in the Elsmere Canyon area.

LOCATION: The project area is located in the Elsmere Canyon vicinity in the southern portion of the Santa Clarita Valley and is bounded by State Route 14 on the west, Whitney Canyon on the north, the Angeles National Forest on the east, and the Los Angeles City Sphere of Influence on the south.

BACKGROUND

In October 2010, the City purchased 842 acres in the Elsmere Canyon area with the intent to preserve the land as permanent open space. Some of the City-owned land is adjacent to other parcels owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Mountains Recreation/Conservation Authority) that were likewise purchased for preservation purposes. After the City land purchase was completed, staff was directed to commence proceedings to annex Elsmere Canyon into the City. Specifically, the City seeks to annex those parcels in the Elsmere Canyon vicinity that are located north and outside of the Los Angeles City Sphere of Influence.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project Setting

The proposed project consists of approximately 807 acres of primarily pristine, undeveloped land containing one single-family residence. The project area is traversed by electric transmission lines and aqueducts, and is adjacent to and includes the eastern edge of State Route 14 in the southern portion of the Santa Clarita Valley. The project area does not contain any commercial centers or uses, nor does it contain any schools or improved parks. There are no major streets or arterials within the project area, although there are unimproved roads that are used by both Southern California Edison and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to maintain their utility equipment and transmission facilities. The area contains informal hiking trails that

provide access into Elsmere Canyon proper and that also connect to trails in the Whitney Canyon open space area that is also owned by the City. The project area also includes residential parcels near the intersection of Newhall Avenue and State Route 14 that are owned by private individuals. These parcels, totaling approximately 15 acres, were not purchased by the City for open space purposes and are included within the project area so as not to create an unincorporated County island. Table I contains a summary of land ownership within the project area:

Table I: Parcel Ownership

Owner/Description	Acreage*	Percentage*
Southern California Edison Parcels	2.24	>1%
Private/Residential Parcels	14.58	2%
Right-of-Way/Miscellaneous	30.58	4%
City of Los Angeles Department of Water & Power Parcels	92.81	12%
City of Santa Clarita Parcels	278.13	34%
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Parcels	388.66	48%
Total:	807*	100%*

*These numbers and acreages are approximate, due to rounding.

The project area is located east of State Route 14, south of Whitney Canyon, west of the Angeles National Forest, and north of the City of Los Angeles Sphere of Influence. A map of the project area is shown in Exhibit A. Access to the project area is taken from Sierra Highway via Remsen Street under State Route 14. Remsen Street is gated at Sierra Highway and private automobiles are not currently permitted into the area. Pedestrians, hikers, and cyclists can access the project area either from Sierra Highway via Remsen Street, or from hiking trails in the Whitney Canyon area near the southern terminus of Newhall Avenue. No roadway construction or infrastructure improvements are included as part of the Prezone or General Plan Amendment.

Project Entitlements

Pursuant to the State of California Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000, annexing cities are required to prezone land. The City proposes a General Plan Amendment and Prezone that would change the land use and zoning designations of the annexation area in order to be consistent with the City's zoning and General Plan land use designations. The City land use designation and prezoning would also be consistent with the existing Los Angeles County land use designation for the Santa Clarita Valley area plan, and the City's prezoning would reflect the existing conditions within the proposed annexation area.

The project is located within the City's existing General Plan planning area. Under the City's current General Plan, the entire project area is designated Residential Estate (RE), as shown in Exhibit B. The land use designations for the majority of the project area, approximately 792 acres, would change from Residential Estate to Open Space. The existing single-family residence and three parcels adjacent to the home, approximately 15 acres, would retain the existing Residential Estate designation. Under the jurisdiction of the County of Los Angeles, the project area is zoned A-2-1. This zoning applies to the vacant land and residential properties east of State Route 14. The right-of-way for State Route 14 is not zoned by the County.

The proposed prezone designations for the annexation area include Open Space and Residential Estate, and are shown on the Prezone Map (Exhibit C). Density and acreage information can be found in Table II below. The proposed prezone designations reflect the existing development in the area. The existing home was constructed under the jurisdiction of Los Angeles County in 1962 and the County also permitted the water and electrical facilities when they were constructed. There are no pending entitlements within the project area awaiting County review, and no new development is proposed as part of the annexation project. Any future development that was not previously approved and/or environmentally analyzed by the County of Los Angeles, would be analyzed and reviewed by the City.

Table II: City Prezone

Prezone	Acres	Density
Residential Estate (RE)	15	1 dwelling unit per 2 acres
Open Space (OS)	792	1 dwelling unit per 40 acres

Two additional entitlements are associated with the Elsmere Canyon annexation project that are not within the purview of the Planning Commission: Annexation 10-002 and Sphere of Influence Amendment 10-002, would be heard by the City Council, provided that the Planning Commission recommends that the General Plan Amendment and Prezone be adopted.

The Annexation would amend the existing City boundary to include the project area within the City's jurisdiction. A Sphere of Influence Amendment is required because the proposed project area falls outside of the City's existing sphere boundary. The Sphere of Influence Amendment would contain approximately 807 acres and its boundary would be congruent with the proposed General Plan Amendment and Prezone boundaries. None of the entitlements associated with the project would create County islands or non-contiguous City territory.

ANALYSIS

The proposed General Plan Amendment and Prezone would change the land use designation and potential zoning of the project area. The area would be assigned land use and prezone designations that are consistent with the City of Santa Clarita General Plan and zoning ordinance. The new land use and prezone designations would be generally consistent with the existing County of Los Angeles designations in the project area, as well as the existing land uses. Should the Commission recommend approval of the project and adopt the accompanying resolution, the project would proceed to the City Council for further consideration. Upon the approval of the City Council, the General Plan Amendment and Prezone would become effective immediately, changing the land use designation of the project area to Open Space and Residential Estate. Actual zoning of the land would only occur when the project area is formally annexed by the City of Santa Clarita.

GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY

Although the current land uses in the project area are consistent with the City's General Plan, the project would redesignate the majority of the project area as open space, reflecting the City's

intent to preserve the undeveloped land as a permanent open, greenbelt area. The project is consistent with the following policies of the Land Use Element of the General Plan:

- Policy 2.12: Promote the retention of open space to preserve significant ridgelines, to provide land use buffers, and to provide for both public safety and oak tree preservation.*
- Policy 2.13: Encourage the preservation of the Angeles National Forest and Los Padres National Forest as an open space reserve close to the urban interface, and an important wildlife habitat and corridor.*
- Policy 5.9: Promote the public acquisition of significant ecological areas with the intent of preserving them as natural open space.*
- Policy 5.11: Preserve and protect endangered fauna and flora species, and their habitats.*

The General Plan Amendment and Prezone would also be consistent with, and would promote the following goals of, the General Plan Open Space and Conservation Element:

- Goal 1: To preserve the special natural features which define the Santa Clarita planning area and give it its distinct form and identity.*
- Goal 2: To preserve designated natural ridgelines in the planning area to maintain the aesthetic character of the Santa Clarita Valley.*
- Goal 3: To protect significant ecological resources and ecosystems, including but not limited to, sensitive flora and fauna habitat areas.*
- Goal 4: To preserve open space areas for recreational use as a natural buffer to more intensive land uses.*
- Goal 5: To use the open space designation to ensure the public health and safety and welfare in areas subject to natural hazards.*
- Goal 10: Protect the historical and culturally significant resources which contribute to community identity and a sense of history.*

Under the County's Santa Clarita Valley Area Plan, the project area is designated as Hillside Management. This is generally consistent with the City's existing General Plan designation for the area, Residential Estate (RE). The proposed Open Space (OS) designation for the area would likewise be consistent with the County's Hillside Management designation, and is more appropriate for the rugged and undeveloped portions of the project site that are to be preserved as permanent open space.

Though it is not yet adopted, the General Plan Amendment would also be consistent with the land use designations proposed in One Valley One Vision (OVOV), the joint City and County General Plan. The General Plan Amendment would be generally consistent with Los Angeles County's proposed OS and RR1 (Rural Residential) land use designations under OVOV, which permit the existing uses in the project area.

UNIFIED DEVELOPMENT CODE CONSISTENCY

Whereas the City's General Plan map designates land uses for the portions of the Santa Clarita Valley within the General Plan planning area, the City's zoning map does not include the proposed annexation area because the area is located outside of Santa Clarita's city limits. The City of Santa Clarita zoning map must be consistent with the General Plan Land Use Map designations. Therefore, in order to facilitate the annexation of the project area into the City, the parcels within the proposed annexation area must be assigned prezoning designations that are consistent with the City's zoning ordinance. Table III illustrates the existing County of Los Angeles zoning for the project area, along with the proposed City prezoning designations and acreages. A map showing the proposed prezone designations is shown in Exhibit C.

Table III: Zoning Summary

Existing County of Los Angeles Zoning	Proposed Prezone City of Santa Clarita	Acres
A-2-1 (Heavy Agriculture)	Residential Estate (RE)	15
A-2-1 (Heavy Agriculture)	Open Space (OS)	792

The proposed prezone is consistent with the existing uses in the project area. The vast majority of the project area is undeveloped, vacant land; although a single-family home is located in the northwest portion of the project area, adjacent to State Route 14 and Newhall Avenue. The Open Space zone would preserve hillside and canyon parcels that are owned primarily by public agencies. The privately-owned residential parcels that would be prezoned Residential Estate would have a density of .5 dwelling unit per acre (one dwelling unit for every two acres). This compares to the County zoning of A-2-1, which requires a minimum one acre lot size; however, the Hillside Management designation would further reduce the allowable units in the project area under the County's Santa Clarita Valley Area Plan. City zoning would require larger lots than what is currently allowed by the County; however, due to topography and hillside constraints, the two acre minimum lot size is more appropriate as it reflects the realistic development limitations within the project area. Under OVOV, the permitted density would be further reduced to one dwelling unit per 20 acres. Once prezoned to the proposed land use designations, the project area would be consistent with the City's existing Unified Development Code and General Plan.

PUBLIC NOTICING

In compliance with the UDC noticing requirements, a public notice advertising this public hearing item was mailed to the eight private and public property owners who own land within the project area. Notices were also sent to all agencies and parties that own land within a 1,000' radius of the proposed annexation area. Approximately 90 notices were sent in all. An 1/8-page advertisement was placed in The Signal newspaper on January 27, 2011, and two public hearing

signs were posted in the area: one at the southern terminus of Newhall Avenue, and the other at the intersection of Remsen Street and Sierra Highway. Staff has received no letters of opposition to the project.

ENVIRONMENTAL STATUS

An Initial Study was prepared that evaluated the potential impacts of the project. No significant impacts were identified that could reasonably result from the General Plan Amendment or Prezone. Likewise, no potentially significant impacts were identified that could result from the Sphere of Influence Amendment or the eventual annexation into the City, should this project be approved by the Planning Commission and City Council. It is therefore determined that Master Case 10-150 and its associated entitlements would not have a significant effect on the environment. The requested General Plan Amendment and Prezone are both consistent with Los Angeles County land use planning policies and reflect the project area's existing development and uses.

The Negative Declaration for this project was prepared and circulated for public review and comment beginning January 28, 2011, through March 1, 2011.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission:

- 1) Open the public hearing;
- 2) Receive testimony from the public;
- 3) Close the public hearing; and
- 4) Adopt Resolution No. P11-07, recommending that the City Council adopt a resolution to adopt the Negative Declaration and approve Master Case 10-150; inclusive of General Plan Amendment 10-003 and Prezone 10-002, for the Elsmere Canyon Annexation and Sphere of Influence Amendment.

ATTACHMENTS

Resolution No. P11-07
Draft Negative Declaration and Initial Study
Vicinity Map (Exhibit A)
General Plan Amendment Map (Exhibit B)
Proposed Prezone Map (Exhibit C)