



November 8, 2019

By E-mail

Councilmember Michael Bonin, 11th District
City of Los Angeles
200 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Vincent Bertoni, Director of Planning
City of Los Angeles
200 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Milena Zasadzien, Major Projects
City of Los Angeles
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Los Angeles, CA 90012

Michelle Bisnoff
Brentwood Community Council
149 S Barrington Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90049-3310

Dear Councilmember Bonin, et al.,

I am the President of Brentwood Hills Homeowners Association (Brentwood Hills), and am writing to comment upon the Proposed Berggruen Institute Project and the Environmental Assessment Form (EAF) and Initial Study (IS) recently filed by the project proponents. Brentwood Hills looks forward to reviewing additional project documents and to participating in the environmental review process under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), but has serious concerns regarding the Project, even as reconfigured in the EAF and Initial Study.

By way of background, Brentwood Hills is a community of about 450 single-family homes along the western ridge of Mandeville Canyon. In the very midst of our community lie two of the most popular trailheads in Los Angeles County: the entrance to the 4-mile-long Westridge-Canyonback Fire Road at the end of Westridge Road, stretching up to San Vicente Mountain Park on the dirt portion of Mulholland Drive; and the Sullivan Canyon Trailhead at the end of Queensferry Road, which also reaches Dirt Mulholland via the Sullivan Ridge Fire Road.

Brentwood Hills believes that public lands and parks are for the public to use, as well as providing important habitat for the many plants and animals that inhabit the Westridge-Canyonback Wilderness Park and adjacent lands. Brentwood Hills, SOMI and the Canyonback Alliance (and many others) were important participants in the efforts to protect and create the Westridge-Canyonback Wilderness Park, and also fought the proposed Castle & Cooke project on Canyonback ridge. In fact, Brentwood Hills was a party to the settlement agreement with Castle & Cooke that protected both the open space easements that were granted to the MRCA and recorded on the property, and that mandated public access to the Riordan trail that crosses the property. Brentwood Hills also opposed the previous configuration of the Project that improperly invaded these recorded open space and trail easements.

Under what we understand is the current configuration of the Project as disclosed in the EAF and IS, the Berggruen Institute is proposing private offices, accommodations and an out-sized private events center in the midst of public open space and a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, where existing residents have highly constrained routes of escape. Because the only permitted use for that property is a limited number of residential homes, not a high-intensity private institutional use, and because the Project exceeds hillside height limits and slope density standards, the Berggruen Institute tries to claim its project is an “Educational Institution.” However, the Los Angeles Municipal Code expressly defines “Educational Institutions” as “colleges or universities supported wholly or in part by public funds and other colleges or universities giving general academic instruction as prescribed by the State Board of Education.” Private colleges and universities must be licensed by the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education to do business in California. By its own admission, the Berggruen Institute is not a college or university, but simply a privately operated think tank that employs staff and provides grants to serve its own initiatives. As such, it is clearly a non-permitted use.

Nor can the Berggruen Institute claim that is protecting and restoring open space and trails. As noted above, the MRCA open space and trail easements are recorded mandates obtained as a result of litigation with Castle & Cooke, and pre-existed the Berggruen Institute’s purchase of the property for its proposed institutional use.

As such, we cannot support the Project as currently configured and proposed. Although the Berggruen Institute has informed Brentwood Hills and the public that the Project will be subject to a full CEQA analysis including an Environmental Impact Report, and we understand the configuration of the Project may change as a result of that process, we urge that public decision-makers undertake a careful review of the Project and a strict zoning and permit analysis, and not allow a project of this scope and unpermitted nature to be constructed in the middle of this important parkland, open space and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone.

Sincerely,



Michael R. Leslie
President,
Brentwood Hills Homeowners Association