

CANYON AREA PRESERVATION

Information about preserving our canyons, hillsides, and the foothills.

September 1, 2003

To: Canyon Area Preservation Activists, Friends, and Supporters
Fr: Steve Crouch

RE: Whitebird's Mass Mailing About Canyon Hills

Dear Friends,

The other week I received a letter from Whitebird, Inc. telling me about their new project, Canyon Hills, that they want to build in the vicinity of the Tujunga Cross on down the hills to La Tuna Canyon Road. Did you receive a letter, too? This was the first time I've gotten a letter like this about ANY project in our area – it sure must be important! It sure is a HUGE grading and construction project for this area.

Well, this is it. This is what I've been telling you about for going on 3 or 4 years now. They have finished their Draft Environmental Impact Report, submitted it to the City, and now they're ready to reveal it to the citizenry.

Some of you may not have received their letter and the accompanying "fact sheet", so I wanted to help everyone out by reprinting it in its entirety and sending it to you. Of course, I can't just let them get away with their public relations blitz without helping people understand a little of the history behind what they are saying! So, what follows is their letter, their ~~propaganda~~ fact sheet, and a few pages of my comments and alternate facts (some would say, the true facts).

Please read the enclosed and make up your own mind. Whitebird asks for your comments, and I encourage each and every one of you to request your own personal copy of the full Draft Environmental Impact Report so you can study the issue and give them your educated opinion. I'm serious about that.

And, since this is probably as overwhelming to you as it is to me, I'd like to ask you to make a tax-deductible donation to help us provide the information and resources we need as a community to deal with and understand this project, to help pay for the experts we're going to need to sort through the Canyon Hills Draft Environmental Impact Report. Please make your donations to:

Glendale-Crescenta VOICE (Volunteers Organized In Conserving the Environment)
P.O. Box 273
Montrose, CA 91021
Or call them at (818) 249-0900, FAX (661) 250-2008, or email gcvoice@gcvoice.org.

Thanks for your support! Please keep informed and do what you can do. Also, print this out and give it to your neighbors, email it to your friends, and ask them to join our mailing list.

Canyon Hills Letterhead

Logo of some rounded hilltops with the sun rising behind them

No return address

August 20, 2003

Dear Neighbor: [1]

On behalf of Whitebird, Inc., I am writing to update you on the status of the proposed Canyon Hills residential project in La Tuna Canyon. Many of you have followed our project closely and previously met with us; for others, this letter and the enclosed information sheet will serve as an introduction. [2]

Since 1999, we have been meeting with the community, the council office and the Los Angeles Department of City Planning to discuss the responsible development of the Canyon Hills site [3]. The input we received heavily influenced the design and use of the property. In particular, the project density was substantially reduced and approximately 78 percent (693 acres) of the project site will be preserved as open space [4].

During the last year, we have been hard at work with the City on the environmental impact report (EIR) for the project. During that time, we have learned much more about the property and carefully analyzed project impacts. In a few weeks we will reach an important milestone when the Draft EIR is completed and released by the City for public comment. The Draft EIR will describe the project in detail, discuss its potential impacts and recommend mitigation measures to address those impacts. Shortly after the Draft EIR is released, we will be back in touch with you with additional information. [5]

I do hope that you will review the additional details enclosed. We look forward to a continuing dialogue.

Sincerely,

Richard Percell
Project Manager
Whitebird, Inc.

Attachment

Canyon Hills Letterhead

Logo of some rounded hilltops with the sun rising behind them

No return address

The Canyon Hills Project

Canyon Hills is a proposed housing development located at 8000 West la Tuna Canyon Road. The site is comprised of 887 acres of land situated in the Verdugo Mountains and bounded by Verdugo Crestline Drive on the north and La Tuna Canyon Road on the south. The Foothill Freeway (Interstate 210) bisects the project site into two areas.

The proposed 280 single-family homes would be clustered on approximately 194 acres (22 percent) of the 887-acre site. Approximately 211 homes would be constructed on 142 acres north of the freeway, and 69 homes would be constructed on 52 acres south of the freeway.

You Spoke... We Listened

- Our original proposal was to build 375 homes. You asked for lower density and so we reduced our plan by almost 25 percent. [6]

Enhancing Equestrian Facilities

- A new three-acre equestrian park will be created adjacent to La Tuna Canyon Road and will be available for public use. It will include a staging area for horses, an equestrian arena and a small parking lot for cars or trailers. [7]

Preserving Open Space

- The proposed project includes the permanent preservation of 693 acres of open space, approximately 78 percent of the project site. [8]

Committed to Quality Aesthetics

- The homes will include an assortment of lots sizes with a variety of architectural styles, including 40 custom-designed homes. [9]
- The project's land planner, Templeton Planning Group, received the 2000 Gold Nugget Grand Award for Best Residential Detached Projects, one of the industry's highest design honors. [10]

Compliance With The Draft Specific Plan

- The project is in full compliance with the Draft San Gabriel/Verdugo Mountains Scenic Preservation Specific Plan. [11]

A Reputation for Excellence

- Our project principals have a successful track record of developing sensitively designed, low-density projects in California that maximize preservation of open space. [12]

For more information, please contact Julia Brown at (888) 625-5440.

I Want To Be Added To Your Mailing List.

Name _____ Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____
Telephone Day/Evening _____ Fax _____
E-Mail _____ Organization _____
Comments _____

Return Address on back of mailing coupon:

The Canyon Hills Project
444 S. Flower Street Suite 1300
Los Angeles, CA 90071-9844 [13]

Canyon Area Preservation Notes and Comments*

* All comments the opinion of the author

[1] Whitebird is not our “neighbor”. They have acquired this property over the past 6 or 8 years at favorable prices, and once they build the project they will be nowhere to be found. Whitebird, Inc. is from Nevada, and their money people are from Texas.

[2] Whitebird had a few meetings in 2000/2001 where they showed a PowerPoint presentation on a project they did in the Sacramento area, showed an artist’s rendering of a project they said they might build, asked people what they wanted to see, and passed out some comment cards. As of 9/1/03, they have systematically avoided presentations to the Sunland Tujunga Neighborhood Council and the Foothill Trails District Neighborhood Council, or to any group with a large membership, and they have not sought any press on the issue.

[3] Whitebird has primarily been meeting with the Planning Department staff during this time. They have also met with Dale Thrush in Wendy Greuel’s office, but I’m not sure how much they’ve actually met with Wendy or any other City Council people. They have employed a high-priced, well connected lobbyist for several years, and the law firm they hired is one of the most influential on city matters.

[4] Whitebird held a meeting with about 20 people from our community in 2001 where they showed a map of a project they hoped they might build. They said they would be allowed 375 homes on their 887 acres by current zoning, and they would be clustering them in the area between the Tujunga Cross and the 210 Freeway near La Tuna Canyon Road. I specifically asked Rick Percell at that meeting how they came up with that figure, and when it’s discovered they couldn’t possibly be allowed to build that many homes that I didn’t want to hear them say they were “lowering the density for the good of the community”. Look! This is exactly what they’re saying! (More on project density in comment 6 below).

[5] They have indeed been working on the EIR for several years. It will be a long and complicated document. Tell Wendy Greuel, the Planning Department, and Whitebird that the community will need the maximum amount of time allowed to review the DEIR, currently 90 days, but if enough people require more time maybe we can petition Councilmember Greuel for more time, given the fact that we are all citizens with day jobs, while Whitebird has paid legions of experts for several years to generate the document. We need as much time as possible.

[6] The first question to ask is, (a) how many homes would be allowed under current zoning, Community Plan, and proposed Scenic Plan rules with the modifications required by the 15% Slope Plan Amendment, the Hillside Ordinance, and other ordinances and restrictions? The second question to ask is, (b) who says that the entire density of an 887 acre building project should be clustered into 194 acres?

(a) Most of the land is currently zoned A1, two houses every five acres with a minimum average lot width of not less than 300 feet. The 15% Slope Plan Amendment says that when a lot has a slope greater than 15%, the density allowed is reduced according to a specific formula (it could go as low density as one house every 20 acres!). Virtually all of Whitebird’s land is greater than 15% slope (in some areas it’s practically vertical!). We need an independent assessment

of the allowable structures under the current rules, to know exactly what they are talking about.

- (b) The Community Plan calls for clustering potential building pads into more naturally level parts of a property to minimize grading on hillsides. It says nothing about moving a home site from one parcel into another, thereby requiring higher density on the second parcel to accommodate the clustering. Whitebird requires variances from zoning, the Community Plan, and the (future) Scenic Plan to achieve the density they are seeking on this project.

(Note) Some of their land is affected by existing easements for drainage and other encumbrances, so it should not be considered in their total acreage, especially in the portion they intend to dedicate to open space. This would be misleading on their part if they tried including it in their calculations.

[7] The equestrian center idea is attractive to the “horse-owner communities” in La Tuna Canyon, Shadow Hills, and Lake View Terrace. When Whitebird gave their first presentations in 2001 they were saying that the 69 homes on the hilltop property between La Tuna Canyon Road and the 210 were going to be “equestrian estates” (this is not the case now, as there’s not enough level land up there to put horses!). We need to be cautious of these enticements so we don’t let our eye off the ball. No one knows yet what the rules of access will be to this equestrian facility – it’s sure not going to be free! Will it be a membership thing, will they keep it open no matter how many people sign up, or will they close it down after it does the trick of getting people to think they’re doing something for them? We’ll have to see.

[8] Preserving open space is a good thing. We’re glad to see it. Just keep in mind that the property they will be dedicating as open space is extremely rugged, inaccessible, and unbuildable in most cases. Donating this land will actually do Whitebird more good (tax breaks, variances, etc.) than it will the community at large..

[9] If they are saying they will have 40 custom homes out of a total 280, that means 240 (over 85%) will be in a tract home style (albeit with several floor plans available!).

[10] The building industry gives itself awards all the time, so virtually every developer can claim some distinction. What was the award based on – Most Profitable Development, Highest Density Allowed By Law? It would be more meaningful to me if they received awards for, say, The Most Environmentally Friendly Developer, or Best Example of Preserving the Natural Characteristics of the Land. What kind of land planner would you like to see be given the responsibility of developing about 10% of the Verdugo Mountain land and virtually isolating the wildlife that lives there? Maybe we should give them some recommendations.

[11] This is a curious statement, since the Scenic Plan is not finalized as of 9/1/2003. A community group has been meeting with Dale Thrush, Chief Planning Deputy in Councilmember Wendy Greuel’s office, for the past three years to try and change the Plan as it’s being proposed by the Planning Department. We thought we had an agreement in September 2002 when it was approved by the full City Council at the meeting in Lake View Terrace, but since then the City Attorney and Planning Department have totally rewritten the Scenic Plan once again. This latest version is a virtual annulment of everything our group offered. Could it be that the Planning Department has been listening to Whitebird and their lobbyists to determine rules that will be acceptable to them, while minimizing the concerns of the

community group that represents a cross section of the communities that have sought a Scenic Plan for over 20 years?

[12] Is anyone aware of the other projects Whitebird and its backers have been involved in? We should have them identify their previous projects. By researching local papers, official proceedings, and court documents we might be able to get an idea of how well received their other projects were in the local communities. Of course, we'd have to know their other "dba" company names to track them down. Anybody have access to the Internet?

[13] This appears to be the address for a consulting company. A quick search on Google for the address came up with the following:

Consensus Planning Group, Inc.
444 S. Flower Street, Suite 1300
Los Angeles, CA 90071
(213) 438-1755
(213) 438-1764

Rick Percell, Project Manager for Whitebird, actually lives in Nevada. Here's his address (at least the last one I have for him):

Whitebird Development Group
Richard Percell and Associates
6148 Foxcroft Avenue
Las Vegas, Nevada 89108

If you respond to Whitebird's request for comments, please be sure to request your own personal copy of the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Canyon Hills Project.

Also, keep in mind that any comments you make to their consulting public relations company "may be used against you in a court of law" (to paraphrase the Miranda rights granted to suspects undergoing arrest!).