



City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning  
221 North Figueroa Street, Suite 1350  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

REF: Environmental Case No. ENV-2019-4565-EIR

Dear Councilmember Bonin and City Planner Alan Como:

The Upper Mandeville Canyon Association strongly opposes the development of the Berggruen Institute in its proposed location for numerous reasons. Virtually all of the hillside residents in Mandeville Canyon and nearby neighborhoods oppose it as well.

We are astonished that an organization of scholars and intellectuals, dedicated to “improving governance” and enhancing democracy, would so disregard popular opinion and public safety to inflict this high-impact development on our lives and on the wildland environment.

We believe it will diminish open space, interrupt a wild animal corridor, generate loud noise from construction, bulldozing, compacting, dirt hauling, power tools and machinery. The ongoing din of operations and the Institute’s many special events will impact wildlife and neighboring residents. Buildings will block expansive viewsheds, increase traffic on already clogged thoroughfares - especially in emergency exit situations - and likely reduce home resale values. It may impinge on unstable ground slopes, cause troublesome runoff and possibly increase winter flood damage to homes on Mandeville’s Merrimac Road, which have been damaged in the past.

Our gravest concern in Mandeville Canyon is the increased fire danger that this project, in a Very High Fire Danger Severity Zone, may bring to our homes and to our lives.

Mandeville Canyon is the immediate western neighbor of Mr. Berggruen's 450 acres of highly flammable dry chaparral and tall grass. He proposes to build on two ridges that are often swept by high velocity Santa Ana winds, which also blow over us. A high wind-driven fire from that property will threaten homes in Mandeville Canyon.

The devastating Bel Air fire in 1961 was just such a fire, which burned 484 homes - many of them in Mandeville Canyon - plus 16,900 acres. The Woolsey/Malibu Fire of 2018, in similar terrain, burned 96,949 acres, 1,643 structures and killed 3 people. A Berggruen fire, involving Mandeville, Westridge, Sullivan Canyon and Pacific Palisades could rival those numbers. We had a fire in 1978, which originated in Mandeville and travelled the ridges to Topanga. Under altered conditions it would have devastated the Palisades.

There are about 28,000 construction fires in the U.S. every year. This vast project will be under construction for 6 or more years. There will be the dubious attempt to stabilize the "Serpentine Road" over Mission Canyon 8, acreage now under option by Berggruen for access and egress to his property. Mission Canyon 8 is an unlined landfill on top of an old City dump which still emits methane gas from the garbage and deteriorating pipes below. (Some Summer days, the methane smell can reach Mandeville.)

In the 1980's, Mission Canyon 8 methane, ignited by a plumber's torch, erupted in a flash fire. The 2019 Getty Fire lit up that leaking methane once again. There was another construction fire at neighboring Mountaingate in 1981, when a plumber's torch ignited one of fifteen wood-framed structures. They all burned to the ground because firefighters were trapped in a traffic jam on Sepulveda Blvd. These days, traffic on Sepulveda is even worse.

The Serpentine Road, the designated fire exit route for the Institute, would usher fleeing vehicles eastward, directly into fire propelled by southwest-bound Santa Ana winds. There have been five wildfires in the Sepulveda pass in the past few years. The fact that all of our canyons were evacuated in the 2019 Getty Fire is proof that fire fighters believe that if any of these fires are amplified by high wind the results can be devastating.

The hard question that must be answered for the residents and homeowners of Mandeville Canyon, Westridge, Sullivan and points west, concerns the limited methods of fighting a wind-driven wildfire on this property.

If a fire from the dry brush-covered Berggruen land is propelled by very high-speed Santa Ana wind of the sort we do experience here, and if that high wind prevents firefighting helicopters and airplanes from flying and attacking flames from the air, what will stop Mandeville and neighborhoods west from burning?

We say the honest answer to that question, which Berggruen and the LAFD avoid answering, is NOTHING WILL STOP SUCH A WILDFIRE. We see these monster fires on the news often. 10,000 homes have burned in California in 2020. Why would anyone tempt such fate here?

Berggruen says they will have fire equipment and water on site, but there are no wide firebreaks and limited fire roads. Even if both were extensive, it is rough territory and you cannot put ground equipment and firefighters in front of an onrushing fire. (Available water on that site will attract homeless campers, who have started some of the Sepulveda fires.)

Fire experts privately admit that construction and increased density in the Santa Monica Mountains amplify the possibility and the ill effects of fire. This is at a time when home fire insurance fees have doubled in two years and continue to rise. Many residents on modest incomes may be driven from their homes. If Berggruen's project contributes to all these risks, will he at least be required to post a large insurance bond on our homes and share liability with L.A. City and Country for enabling destruction in the face of so many warnings?

In 2012 there was an application for a zoning variance for an art institute on the Kauffman Property in Upper Mandeville. The Planning Department ruled in that case that granting Ms. Kauffman's waiver of our single-family zoning laws would set a precedent for other neighborhoods and denied the permit.

Berggruen has so far been stopped by a City Attorney judgement that he would be in violation of the Brentwood-Pacific Palisades Community Plan. To evade that judgement, Berggruen has come up with a new twist: This "private enterprise Institute" is declaring its own "Specific Plan" which an EIR is - absurdly - expected to evaluate before any such plan has been written or described.

We are often told that Mr. Berggruen's huge fortune and his far-reaching influence on our representatives and public employees make his development in this location inevitable. We don't believe that. Upper Mandeville has been treated well by our representatives and the LAFD. They are supporting fire-spotting cameras, an emergency communications network, an upgrade of fire roads etc., to make us safer in fire and other emergencies.

We fervently hope that Mr. Bonin and the Department of City Planning will admit the danger and disruption that Berggruen brings and stop this development in its tracks. Certainly, hillside residents will not stop fighting against it.

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### Proposed Berggruen Institute

