



January 18, 2021

By Email Only to Alan.Como@lacity.org

Alan Como, City Planner
City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning
221 N. Figueroa Street, Room 1350
Los Angeles, CA 90012

RE: OPPOSE the Berggruen Institute Specific Plan
Case Number: ENV-2018-1509-EIR

Dear Mr. Como:

I am the President of Save Our Canyon (SOC), a non-profit created to protect the environment, the wildlife, the natural beauty of Benedict Canyon, and the quiet, tranquil quality of life for the residents of this hillside community in the Santa Monica Mountains. I'm writing to express SOC's strong opposition to the City potentially allowing a private developer to abuse the Specific Plan process in order to circumvent zoning and regulatory requirements enabling a private developer to build a large Institute in the middle of protected open space in Mountaingate, thereby creating two new zoning categories in conflict with the area's Community Plan, "Berggruen Institute Specific Plan zone" and "Berggruen Institute Open Space zone."

SOC supports the Mountaingate community, our neighbor just west of the 405, in its opposition to the City's misguided attempt to allow a private developer to up-zone the property that would allow more than 150,000 square feet of development, 200,000 cubic yards of grading, hundreds of people visiting the property daily with operations 24 hours per day, seven days per week. This type of intensification of use is wholly inappropriate for a Santa Monica Mountains community.

The Mountaingate neighborhood, and similarly, the Benedict Canyon community, is designated "very low-density single-family residential zoning" in the fire-prone Santa Monica Mountains. Benedict Canyon is likewise threatened by a grossly out-of-scale commercial development project, the "Retreat at Benedict Canyon" that

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the City has similarly allowed to submit to a Specific Plan process in order to circumvent the zoning code. Both projects introduce high-intensity commercial uses into quiet hillside single-family neighborhoods, and are inconsistent with the General Plan, the associated Community Plans, and violate the grading and height provisions of the Baseline Hillside Ordinance, an ordinance adopted to curb mansionization in hillside single-family neighborhoods.

This is spot zoning¹ by another name. If the “Berggruen Institute Specific Plan zone” is permitted, it would set a dangerous precedent for the Santa Monica Mountains with far-reaching and irreversible impacts as would the high-intensity commercial “Benedict Canyon Specific Plan zone.”

Councilmember Paul Koretz, in an October 11, 2018 letter opposing the hotel project in Benedict Canyon, captured the essence of why these types of projects should be rejected by the Planning Department: “I cannot support the perception of spot zoning, a hillside General Plan Amendment and Zone Change. A project like this could have a profound impact on the surrounding community - forever changing the character of this residential area.”

Koretz added, “I’m equally troubled by the potential environmental impacts such as traffic congestion on narrow roads, grading, removal of protected trees, impeding wildlife corridors along with the possible impact of a project this size on fire safety.” These same principals apply to the Berggruen Institute project.

The 2019 Getty Fire underscores the risk of developing in the wildland-urban interface. The fire forced thousands of people to evacuate the area, designated as a very high fire hazard severity zone. “It is well-accepted that building in wildland areas like these increases the risk of fire.”²

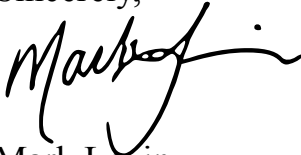
¹ The granting to a particular parcel of land a classification concerning its use that differs from the classification of other land in the immediate area.

² See, e.g., PNAS, Rapid Growth of the US Wildland-Urban Interface Raises Wildfire Risk (Feb. 6, 2018) <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/115/13/3314.full.pdf>); New York Times, Climate Change Is Fueling Wildfires Nationwide, New Report Warns (Nov. 27, 2018) (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/27/climate/wildfire-global-warming.html>); Scientific American, Living on the Edge: Wildfires Pose a Growing Risk to Homes Built Near Wilderness Areas (June 1, 2018) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/miicle/living-on-the-edgewildfires-posses-a-growing-risk-to-homes-built-near-wilderness-areas/>

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Save Our Canyon urges the Planning Department to deny the Berggruen Institute project and save the community and city from engaging in a lengthy and time-consuming process that if permitted would enable a private developer to use a single-purpose City ordinance to create two new zones in conflict with the Community Plan without offering a single public benefit. This would set an extremely dangerous precedent in our vulnerable Santa Monica Mountains' environment and hillside communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Levin", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Levin
Board President
Save Our Canyon