

Antioch City Council July 28, 2020 - Comments, Agenda Item #2 "The Ranch"

Good evening City Council Members,

My name is Seth Adams, Land Conservation Director for Save Mount Diablo. (SMD) is a non-profit conservation organization founded in 1971 which acquires land for addition to parks on and around Mount Diablo and monitors land use planning which might affect protected lands. We build trails, restore habitat, and are involved in environmental education. In 1971 there was just one park on Mount Diablo totaling 6,778 acres; today there are almost 50 parks and preserves around Mount Diablo totaling 120,000 acres. We include more than 11,000 donors and supporters.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on potential recommendation for certification of the draft Environmental Impact Report, Development Agreement, General Plan amendments and other items for The Ranch Project.

SMD has been involved in Antioch for more than 20 years, and in this project since late 2014, when we raised concerns on issues ranging from the unit count to the size of the buffer around Sand Creek, to the Project's effect on some of Antioch's most prominent hills.

Empire Mine Road is used by residents as a wonderful trail. It's been closed for 20 years and Antioch's goal should be to continue that use forever, with Empire Mine Road protected as a public trail.

We even helped qualify an initiative with signatures from 9,000 Antioch residents to give a greater voice to the public in the Sand Creek Focus Area, the "Let Antioch Voters Decide" initiative, in hopes of encouraging extended conversations with the public about proposed projects. Our initiative will be on the November 3rd ballot.

Our major concerns in the Sand Creek Focus Area are about Sand Creek, impacts on or benefits for Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve to the west and Roddy Ranch/Deer Valley Regional Preserve to the south, effects on wildlife and natural resources, and aesthetics in preserving the hills and spectacular views to surrounding open spaces. We believe that the hills along the south edge of the Sand Creek area should be protected and all the area south of the hills in Horse Valley. So should the entire area west of Empire Mine Road.

Richland qualified their own initiative, also with over 9,000 signatures from Antioch voters. They included a smaller, improved version of their project, protecting the hills and the ridges. For five years, and especially for the past two years, Richland has been having that conversation with the community that we hope for in our initiative. Although their initiative was blocked by the courts, and they could have gone back to a larger project, they have not backtracked on any of the improvements to their project or their commitments to the public.

Save Mount Diablo is not taking a specific position on The Ranch project, in support or against, however:

We are pleased with improvements to the project that Richland has made since 2018, such as that

- the unit count for The Ranch has been reduced by 30%
- the footprint has been changed to avoid development impacts to the hills on-site and includes 250 acres of parks and open space.
- a wide creek-buffer to protect the Sand Creek riparian corridor has been incorporated into the Project. That creek buffer is wider than in previous Sand Creek development projects, ranging from a 250' minimum to over 1000' in width. It is a great precedent.
- In addition to protecting the hills in that 250 acres of parks and open space, they have protected a buffer along Empire Mine Road and the strip of historic heritage-sized eucalyptus trees found there
- They have proposed a robust trail system through the project and along Sand Creek, and a staging area for East Bay Regional Park District along Empire Mine Road. Over 7 miles of new public trails.
- In addition to 250 acres of parks and open space within the project, the parcels proposed as mitigation for the Project's biological impacts, just a mile away, total 1,040 acres, support rare wildlife species and would connect the Black Diamond Mines and Deer Valley Regional Preserves, enhancing wildlife corridors and increasing the long-term viability of wildlife in the region.
-

The Ranch Project has been substantially improved since we first engaged on it. Most of our suggested improvements have been adopted. The proposed mitigation area is exceptional. Overall, these changes would yield a net conservation benefit for the natural resources of Antioch and the Diablo region. Thank you.