

## **PARKS, RIVER AND OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE**

### **MEETING REPORT**

AUGUST 13, 2008, Loz Feliz Police Center, Citibank, 1965 Hillhurst Ave

*Attending: PROS Committee Members Mary Button, Gerry Hans, Lynn Brown, Carol Henning, Chuck Soter, Kathryn Louyse and Bernadette Soter. GGPNC Boardmember, Tom Wilson, Save the Southwest Museum Coalition Member, Nicole Poessert, Autry Museum CFO Luke Swetland, Autry Attorney Bill Delvec of Latham & Watkins, Autry Consultant Faith Raiguel and Project Architect, Brenda Levin.*

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The Committee discussed the entitlements and variances being sought by the Autry National Center in Griffith Park in connection with its proposed addition of 129,000 square feet to its existing 161,271 square feet museum facility there. (Phase 1: 79,000 square feet. Phase 2: 50,000 square feet). The requests were heard by the Planning Department at a public hearing on Monday, August 18. Written comment on the requests will be accepted by the Planning Department until August 29, 2008.

Consensus was reached that the requested entitlements and variances are unsuitable in a zoned Open Space and in a Park, and are particularly inappropriate in Griffith Park, given its unique identity. The applicant is proposing an expansion whose earmarks not only degrade the Park's setting, but establish several Park-changing precedents, most of which are extraneous to its museum mission. In light of the applicant's lease of 12 acres of dedicated parkland from the City at the token rate of \$1 a year, it is reasonable to ask the applicant to respect its context and refrain from urbanizing and commercializing its leasehold.

#### **1. The Committee believes that the addition of 129,000 sq feet, to an existing facility of 161,271 square feet is not justified in an Open Space.**

Completed as proposed, the project will be roughly equal in area to four renovated Griffith Observatories and 80,000 square feet larger than the West Exhibit Hall of the L.A. Convention Center. The Autry lease area in Griffith Park will lose its remaining appearance and function as an open space--in effect negating its zoning--which was created and set in place for the purpose of protecting unbuilt areas, such as parks, from encroaching densification.

The Autry's justification for this massive expansion is its absorption of the Southwest Museum Collection which was housed previously in a 32,000 square foot building. We see no justification for expansion beyond that amount and oppose the precedent its sets for building ratios in Griffith Park. There is no guarantee that the Autry's excessive additional square footage will not be sub-leased to restaurant, shopping, and entertainment concessions that do not conform to museum use or park purposes but, given the Autry's \$1 a year lease, will be lucrative tenants. The Autry has already established a pattern of renting its premises for private events that have nothing to do with its museum mission including large outdoor concerts and festival-like events such as the recent Brew Haw Haw Beer Tasting Festival and the Band from TV Concert.

#### **2. The Committee opposes the height variances requested in that they are excessive in a zoned Open Space.**

Size and height limits are designed to preserve the visual nature of open spaces and to set natural and reasonable limits on the size of structures in such zones. The Autry is asking to double the permissible building height in an Open Space from 30 feet to 60 feet and, in the case of the tower element, to nearly quadruple the allowable height (112 feet is proposed). Dramatic overages such as these would be subjects of opposition if they were proposed by the owner of a private property in an area zoned for Commercial or Residential use. Given that the height variances are being requested on public property in an Open Space, coupled with their precedent-setting nature for future structures in Griffith Park, the Committee opposes these exceptions to the code. The Autry's contention that they are in a grandfathered situation, would be compelling if they would agree to limit their building height to no more than the current height of the body of their building in Griffith Park. In the case of the skyscraper-height tower, we do not see how it supports the Autry's mission as a museum and object to the intrusive nature of this detail.

#### **3. The Committee opposes the Phase 2 parking structure.**

The public has overwhelmingly objected to the introduction of parking structures in Griffith Park, seven of which were proposed in the rejected Melendrez Draft Master Plan which is now undergoing revision. Approving a plan for a parking structure at the Autry, *even if the structure is never built*, will set an

immediate precedent that will be cited to justify the introduction of parking structures elsewhere in the Park. Some reasons why parking structures are opposed in Griffith Park:

They will introduce parking fees—in essence, levy a charge to use the Park which, according to the terms of its donor, should be free. Their introduction in Griffith Park is perceived widely as an attempt to bypass this stipulation.

They will urbanize the Park and introduce urban nuisances: noise pollution (echo chamber conditions), light pollution, (24-hour safety lighting) and security concerns (auto break-ins and assault).

They will have a deadening effect in terms of use, on the areas adjacent to them, thus reducing enjoyable recreation space in the Park.

They are retrograde from an environmental standpoint. Both the imminent renovation of the Zoo parking lot as a permeable surface lot (a Prop O

Environmental Sustainability Project), and the Draft Master Plan Working Group's recommendation that, as they are resurfaced, all lots in Griffith Park be converted to permeable modes, are the exemplars that should be followed.

They are natural bottlenecks that cannot be quickly evacuated, an unacceptable risk in a wildfire prone area such as Griffith Park. The July 27, 2008 fire that came within 1000 feet of the Zoo necessitated the evacuation of 4000 persons and their cars from a surface lot. The five fires that broke out on August 17, 2008 required the evacuation of Travel Town. In crisis situations, slow-to-evacuate parking structures have the potential to become death traps.

In summary, given that the Autry's proposed parking structure will not increase parking on its leasehold--*in fact there will be less parking at the Autry after the expansion than before*—given that the Autry will finance the construction of a surface parking lot in Phase 1 of its plan only to demolish it in Phase 2 to construct a parking structure at a cost of \$25,000 per space, it will be no hardship for the Autry to abandon this project detail. In light of the inefficiency and waste attending this sequence, we are concerned that that the parking structure has been inserted in the Project's Phase 2 is to create an actionable precedent for the introduction of such structures elsewhere in the Griffith Park.

#### **4. The Committee believes that the increase in sign space requested is unnecessary.**

Located in an Open Space, the Autry does not compete with multiple attractions for attention. By way of contrast, amply visited Park attractions such as Griffith Observatory, the Greek Theatre, Travel Town and the Zoo restrict themselves to single, over-door entrance signs. The requested increase in monument sign area from 75 to 100 square feet is intrusive and unwarranted; correspondingly, the 31 signs proposed for the property, half of which will be lit at night, are excessive and add a commercial gloss that is not in keeping with the Park and are detrimental to its natural setting.

#### **5. The Committee opposes the request for a Conditional Use Permit to allow the on-site sale and dispensing of a full line of alcoholic beverages at the Autry.**

The service of alcohol is not permitted by right in an Open Space. When permitted it is subject to conditions. This request translates to the daily service of a full line of alcoholic drinks at whatever restaurant, café, or bar or a combination or multiples thereof that may be aspects of the final expansion. It is the opinion of the Committee that the alcohol variance requested should be denied for daily service of alcohol at the museum's food service(s) but that alcohol may be served at selected museum special events, and that the policy for same should conform with the policy at Griffith Observatory which was developed in close cooperation with the GGPNC. Unlike Griffith Observatory, the Autry does not share any portion of the revenue it derives from the sale of alcoholic beverages with the City, so the Committee believes that this is a generous accommodation.