

19 March 2004

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3/22/2004
#77

Mr. Thom McCue
Monterey County Planning and Building Inspection Department
Coastal Office
2620 First Avenue
Marina, CA 93933

Dear Mr. McCue,

In his 1924 prospectus for the Monterey Peninsula Country Club, S.F.B. Morse specifically noted that horses would play an integral part in his vision for the Del Monte Forest. Morse wrote that "horseback riding will unquestionably have [a] prominent...place among the sports here..." In the 1920s, the Del Monte Forest was laced with 100 miles of bridal paths and the Pebble Beach Riding Stables (completed in 1924) and polo field were given an eminent location within close proximity to the Del Monte Lodge. Today, the Collins Polo Field continues to serve as the town green of Pebble Beach, accommodating the bustling activities of horses, dogs and their owners, as well as various high school athletic events and practice sessions. The short walking distance from the Lodge invites visitors and guests to enjoy the horses and their special environment.

For eighty years, the Pebble Beach Equestrian Center has been a considerate neighbor, charitable benefactor and steadfast reminder of the cultural heritage of the Del Monte Forest. Generations of children have learned the lessons of life as taught from the horse and grown into better members of society for it. Countless tourists from all over the world have benefitted from the opportunity to enjoy the natural beauty of the Forest and its coastline as seen from the back of a horse. In the early 1930s, Richard Collins (for whom the Polo Field was named by S.F.B. Morse in 1967) brought eventing to Pebble Beach. And from the 1950s to the 1970s, Pebble Beach was the site of the United States Equestrian Team's Olympic Trials. Yet, the Draft E.I.R. makes no mention of the rich equestrian history within the Forest, nor of the significance of the site of the present Equestrian Center other than scant reference to Equestrian Center Building 9 (3.10 line 38-3.11 line 4.)

In 2004, only one quarter of the trails system which was laid out by S.F.B. Morse remains in existence. Nearly seventy-five miles of trail have been lost to development and disrepair. In 1987, the Pebble Beach Riding and Trails Association was formed with the purpose to "encourage, advise and assist with the preservation, maintenance and improvement of existing equestrian trails, seek and develop new trails, and assist with trail markings." To this end, volunteers from the Association, along with the Trails Coordinator and members of the Pebble Beach Company staff hold monthly trail maintenance days to clear and enhance overgrown and eroded segments of the trail system. While the Draft E.I.R. addresses possible erosion and negative impact on trails near the proposed site of the relocated Equestrian Center, it does not acknowledge the presence of this active group within the community. Nor does the E.I.R. address the substantial negative impact of erosion and vegetative disturbance caused by the illicit use of mountain bikes and motorized vehicles on the trails. Equestrian use of the trails discourages this illicit use and its subsequent damage, yet proposed mitigation for trail degradation (3.3-14) in the Huckleberry Hill Nature Area would severely minimize and even eliminate availability of trails to horses. In addition, suggested routes to the coast (3.3-17 lines 11-15) are potentially dangerous given increased traffic levels on Congress Road and limit the safe coastal access which equestrians and hikers have enjoyed via the trails system for eighty years.

Despite the extensive and illustrious equestrian history within the Del Monte Forest and given serious restrictions now present on the Sawmill Gulch site, the Draft E.I.R. fails to propose an alternative site within the Forest should development of the plan proceed and the proposed site for the relocated Equestrian Center be deemed unsuitable. Two man-made wetland areas (3.3-28 lines 25-29) significantly affect recreational use at the proposed Equestrian Center site and should be re-evaluated. Current drainage problems could be corrected through proper regrading. Also, given that two permanent scenic easements now exist at the proposed site, that "Measure A has not yet been certified" (4.4-3 lines 36-37) and that "if relevant portions of Measure A are not certified by the Coastal Commission...these aspects of the project may not be approved in their current form." (4.4-6 lines 34-36), the omission of an alternative site for the Equestrian Center remains extremely significant.

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"The general objectives of the Proposed Project, as stated in the application are to: formally preserve large undeveloped tracts of forested open space [and to] preserve management prescriptives to the preserve spaces to enhance habitat values." (5.0-1 lines 21-25). Yet, one need only point to aerial views of the proposed project sites (particularly figures 2.0 3, 12, 22 and 23) to envision the loss of natural habitat and contiguous forest.

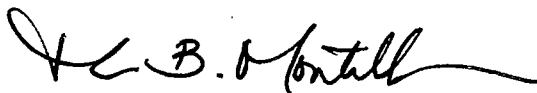
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The Draft E.I.R. puts forth that "[t]he loss of 123 acres of forest in the context of the potential overall cumulative loss of 17% of the extant forest in the Monterey Region would be a considerable contribution to a significant cumulative impact because, even with mitigation...the project would contribute to an overall net loss of forest that could imperil the sustainability of this resource in the long term." (4.4-16). The summary of the cumulative impact analysis (4.4-1 and 2) states that the proposed development plan would result in significant loss of the Monterey Pine Forest, the endemic Bishop Pine, the Gowan Cypress, the Monterey Pygmy Forest, Yadon's Piperia and the California Red-Legged Frog, as well as wetland, dune and environmentally sensitive habitat. These losses call for extreme mitigation on many fronts. Yet, should mitigation efforts fail on one or more of these fronts (as have efforts to reintroduce the Monterey Pine to the Sawmill Gulch area), who or what will mitigate these failures?

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The cumulative impact report is evidence in and of itself that the Del Monte Forest consists of too fragile an ecosystem to support the major upheaval of extended and extreme development. However, should a level of development be allowed which would force the relocation of the Equestrian Center, a new Center must be built within the scope of the present one and within the confines of Pebble Beach. The Pebble Beach Equestrian Center must be allowed to operate as it has for eighty years--in keeping with the vision of S.F.B. Morse--as an important and vital fixture of the Del Monte Forest and nucleus to a thriving and cohesive trail system.

Sincerely,



Thea B. Montella
Pebble Beach

cc California Coastal Commission
Monterey Board of Supervisors