

Ahmanson Ranch Project: Will it ever be safe?

By

Mary DeVeny

Last week I tried to walk the 5K trail through Ahmanson Ranch State Park, located just west of Los Angeles. I didn't get very far because a big rattlesnake had decided to take his morning sleep in the middle of the trail. Yesterday, the rattlesnake had moved elsewhere and as I walked along the trail, I encountered several 100-year-old oak trees, rabbits, about 7 species of birds and an abundance of wild flowers even though there has not been any rain for 2 months. In 2003, after a 10-year court battle, this land, which was slated for a huge housing development that would have destroyed 2800 acres of this beautiful area, was sold to the state of California and became a state park under the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Less than 2 years later, this land again is in danger of being abused. (See previous article: "Ahmanson Ranch Project: Environment vs. Housing Shortage... Who wins?")

Faye Huang, a local businesswoman, hopes to build 30 luxury mountainside homes just east of Ahmanson Ranch. County fire regulations require two access roads into the development. Currently there is only one. Two city of Los Angeles Parks and the Ahmanson Ranch surround the land on three sides. The city had refused to allow a road to be built through its parks and six months ago, the executive director of the Conservancy, Joseph T. Edmiston, told Ms. Huang's attorney that he "wouldn't touch that with a 10 foot pole"- partly because of the high profile campaign by Hollywood celebrities and environmentalists to preserve the Ranch.

Now California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has asked the Conservancy to reconsider its refusal to allow the road. According to Edmiston, Huang initially offered no financial considerations. "Then the governor's office indicated that the proposal could have very substantial benefits for the conservancy." However, state laws require that any money paid by developers would go to the state's general fund and not directly to the conservancy. Edmiston is asking the attorney general's office if the conservancy could receive non-monetary contributions such as picnic tables and toilets. "Our other concern is that there's a (creek) with substantial vegetation adjoining the current jeep track, and if they were to widen it, they'd have to do quite a bit of grading," he said.

Considering the declining approval rating of the Governor (only 38%) and the sensitivity of the Ahmanson Ranch issue, what would motivate Schwarzenegger intervene on behalf of Huang and the law firm of Latham and Watkins who are representing her? According to state records, the law firm contributed \$11,300 last year to the Schwarzenegger's California Recovery Team fund and that lawyers for the firm contributed nearly \$30,000 individually in 2003 and 2004 to Schwarzenegger funds. Huang contributed \$1000 last year to a campaign fund sponsored by Schwarzenegger, \$2000 last year to the Bush-

Chaney presidential campaign and \$1000 to the Republican National Committee.
Huang's attorney denies seeking preferential treatment from the governor.

It seems, at times, that the struggle will never end. I am so grateful to the dedicated members of SASH, The Save Open Space group, the Sierra Club, and Affordable Places who are constantly leading the fight to save open space, encourage smart growth and work endlessly to improve our quality of life and the quality of life for future generations.

Source:

“Gov. Comes to the Aid of GOP Donor” by Daryl Kelley, Los Angeles Times

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