

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

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Regional Planning Commission
Department of Regional Planning
Los Angeles County
320 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, California 90012

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

JAN 31 2023

STATE CLEARING HOUSE

**Project R2015-00089(3) for Major Coastal Development Permit No. RPPL2016004920
and Variance No. RPPL2016004921 for a Ridgetop Residential Development Spanning
Lachusa Canyon and Encinal Canyon**

Dear Commissioners:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) offers the following comments on the proposed above-referenced residence on the ridgeline that separates Lachusa and Encinal Canyons. The County staff report identifies the Project as a 7,809 square foot single-family residential development with a detached playroom, swimming pool, 862-foot-long driveway, 6,512 cubic yards of grading, and appurtenant structures. As proposed, the Project requires variances from the County's certified Santa Monica Mountains Local Implementation Program (LIP) for grading that exceeds 5,000 cubic yards and a driveway that exceeds 300 linear feet.

The Conservancy opposes the Project as proposed for a variety of reasons described below. In short, the Conservancy questions the Project's consistency with the Santa Monica Mountains Local Coastal Program (LCP) regarding habitat connectivity and habitat fragmentation, lack of development clustering and excessive grading and driveway length to accommodate a 9,616 square foot ridgetop development, ridgetop development impacts to multiple watersheds in a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, reduction of public access to the Santa Monica Mountains through elimination of the Three Park Trail without a Condition of Approval to require the implementation (permitting and construction) of the proposed bypass trail, and visual impacts from nearby significant ridgelines and Charmlee Wilderness Park south of the subject property. The Conservancy also believes the *Alternative Development Design* as submitted by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), and further discussed below, is a feasible alternative that requires due consideration.

Habitat Connectivity and Fragmentation

The MRCA owns an approximate 15.5-acre conservation easement immediately west of the subject property on APN 4472-027-001. This conservation easement protects significant ecological resource areas (SERAs) identified in the County's LCP as H1 Habitat, H2 Habitat, and H2 "High Scrutiny" Habitat—habitat areas determined to be of the highest (H1), high (H2), and extra sensitive (H2 "High Scrutiny") biological significance, rarity, and sensitivity. This SERA habitat block, including the area within MRCA's easement that connects to SERA on the subject property, extends north from Charmlee Wilderness Park following the riparian corridor associated with drainages of upper Lachusa Creek. The Project's Biological Assessment (prepared by Forde Biological Consultants, 2016 and 2017) identifies the onsite, westerly connecting drainage as "Drainage 2" consisting of Coast Live Oak Woodland and Purple Sage Scrub Shrubland Alliance and an unlabeled, northerly sub-drainage associated with Drainage 2 consisting of additional Coast Live Oak Woodland, Chamise Chapparral, and an exposed rock outcrop. Due to the presence of Coast Like Oak Woodland, Purple Sage Scrub, and/or Chamise Chapparral acting as riparian habitat for the unlabeled sub-drainage and Drainage 2, mapped onsite H1 Habitat should be expanded, not reduced.

Cursory review of aerial photography following the Woolsey Fire (2018) also indicates the existence of a defined bed-and-bank within Drainage 2 to within 70 feet (at least) of Three Park Trail and within 125 feet (at least) of the proposed development pad. The unlabeled sub-drainage north of Drainage 2 also appears in post Woolsey Fire aerials to have a defined bed-and-bank within 160 feet (at least) of Three Park Trail and closer to the proposed development pad. The attached *Habitat & Drainage Map* and *Dispersed Development Impact Map* provide additional reference.

Demonstration of Environmental Superior Feasible Building Location

The Conservancy disagrees with the Biological Assessment to remap areas west of the central ridgeline as H2 Habitat, and updated biological mapping to include targeted surveys for Santa Susana tarplant (*Deinandra minthornii*) and Crotch's bumblebee (*Bombus crotchii*) may result in expansion of onsite H1 Habitat—or no less than as mapped in the County's LCP. The proposed ridgetop development and related fuel modification would impact at least 1.43 acres of H1 Habitat and H1 Buffer, fragment the largest block of H1 Habitat on the property, and diminish the resources protected by MRCA's conservation easement on the westerly adjacent parcel.

The Project's Biological Assessment identifies "Drainage 1" as a short-run (less than 250 feet) ephemeral drainage leading to a culvert above Encinal Canyon Road and maps this

area as H1 Buffer consisting of annual grasses and herbs. While the LCP prohibits development impacts to H1 Habitat, the LCP does allow driveways through H1 Habitat when no other options are available. The County must substantiate the applicant's claim of line-of-sight requirements for driveway placement within Drainage 1 as the only feasible location with a concurring letter from County Public Works. Nonetheless, because the proposed driveway within Drainage 1 will impact this newly mapped H1 Buffer area with driveway fuel modification and an additional culvert, the County should analyze an alternative Project as suggested by the MRCA that clusters residential development and fuel modification impacts within Drainage 1 to coincide with the driveway and its LCP-allowable fuel modification requirements. Please see the attached *Clustered Development Impact Map* and *Alternative Development Map* for additional reference. Clustering development in this manner would reduce the length of driveway to less than 300 feet and bring the Project closer to compliance with the LCP without a variance.

To ensure all feasible development alternatives are evaluated, the County and applicant should analyze an alternative that reduces the overall footprint of the development from 9,609 square feet (391 feet below the *maximum* allowable development threshold) to a more modest development that may re-envision the detached playroom, swimming pool, or other non-essential features. Clustering development and reducing the development envelope in this manner would also prevent the need to realign the Three Park Trail and avoid adverse impacts to public access between Charmlee Wilderness Park and Encinal Canyon Road.

Siting the proposed Project along the Lachusa Canyon and Encinal Canyon ridgeline forces fuel modification impacts into two coastal Santa Monica Mountain watersheds rather than confining those impacts to a portion of the Encinal Canyon watershed where the 250-foot-long Drainage 1 is already impacted by a culvert below Encinal Canyon Road. Ridgetop development in a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone with a National Park Service calculated Fire Return Interval of less than 19 years (as of 2017 data) places the proposed residence at increased fire risk. Because the entirety of the subject property has repeatedly burned in wildfires, an 862-foot-long driveway further endangers future residents and first responders by placing the development nearly three times further from Encinal Canyon Road than the County's LCP defined upper limit for driveway length.

Three Park Trail Alignment and Scenic Impacts

The existing, but undedicated segment of the Three Park Trail (trail) on the subject property should be retained in its current alignment by utilizing the alternative

development sites previously offered by the MRCA and the Conservancy herein. While public trails are an allowable, resource-dependent use in H1 Habitat per the County's LCP, the proposed trail realignment would increase impacts to H1 Habitat and H1 Buffer in the steep and unstable Drainage 2 and unlabeled sub-drainage beyond the proposed fuel modification impacts associated with the ridgeline residence. In addition, this realigned trail appears to continue onto property not owned by the applicant before rejoining the existing Three Park Trail, and the Project does not indicate how this section of realigned trail will be dedicated, permitted, or constructed.

However, if the proposed entitlement contemplates a new trail alignment to accommodate ridgetop development, the County must require the applicant to (1) complete a full California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review of the proposed trail bypass and (2) require timely, time certain physical implementation of the trail bypass as part of the proposed Project permit granting schedule. Linking the feasibility and timely construction of a trail bypass with any ridgetop development approval would ensure that public access is not reduced in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.


The proposed ridgetop development also has the high potential to impact the public viewshed from Charmlee Wilderness Park, other significant ridgelines in the vicinity, and from Encinal Canyon Road. The photos provided by the applicant were taken during dense fog conditions. At minimum, the applicant must submit additional story pole photos taken during high visibility conditions along public viewing areas from Charmlee Wilderness Park, Encinal Canyon Road, and other publicly accessible trails or ridgelines and from the proposed development area to accurately demonstrate potential impacts to public viewsheds. As presented with the MRCA letter and herein attached *Alternative Development Map* and *Clustered Development Impact Map*, the alternative development options within Drainage 1 maintain the 200-foot buffer from Encinal Canyon Road, minimize H1 Habitat impacts, and provide feasible development alternatives.

To comply with the LCP, the Project impacts must be completely confined to Drainage 1 leading to Encinal Road (below the central ridgeline) to preserve public trail access, public viewsheds, and minimize impacts to the subject property's largest habitat block. If the applicant chooses to proceed with this Project as proposed, the Conservancy recommends the Regional Planning Commission deny the Project.

Please direct any future correspondence to Paul Edelman of our staff by email at edelman@smmc.ca.gov, by phone at 310-589-3200 ext. 128, or at the above letterhead address.

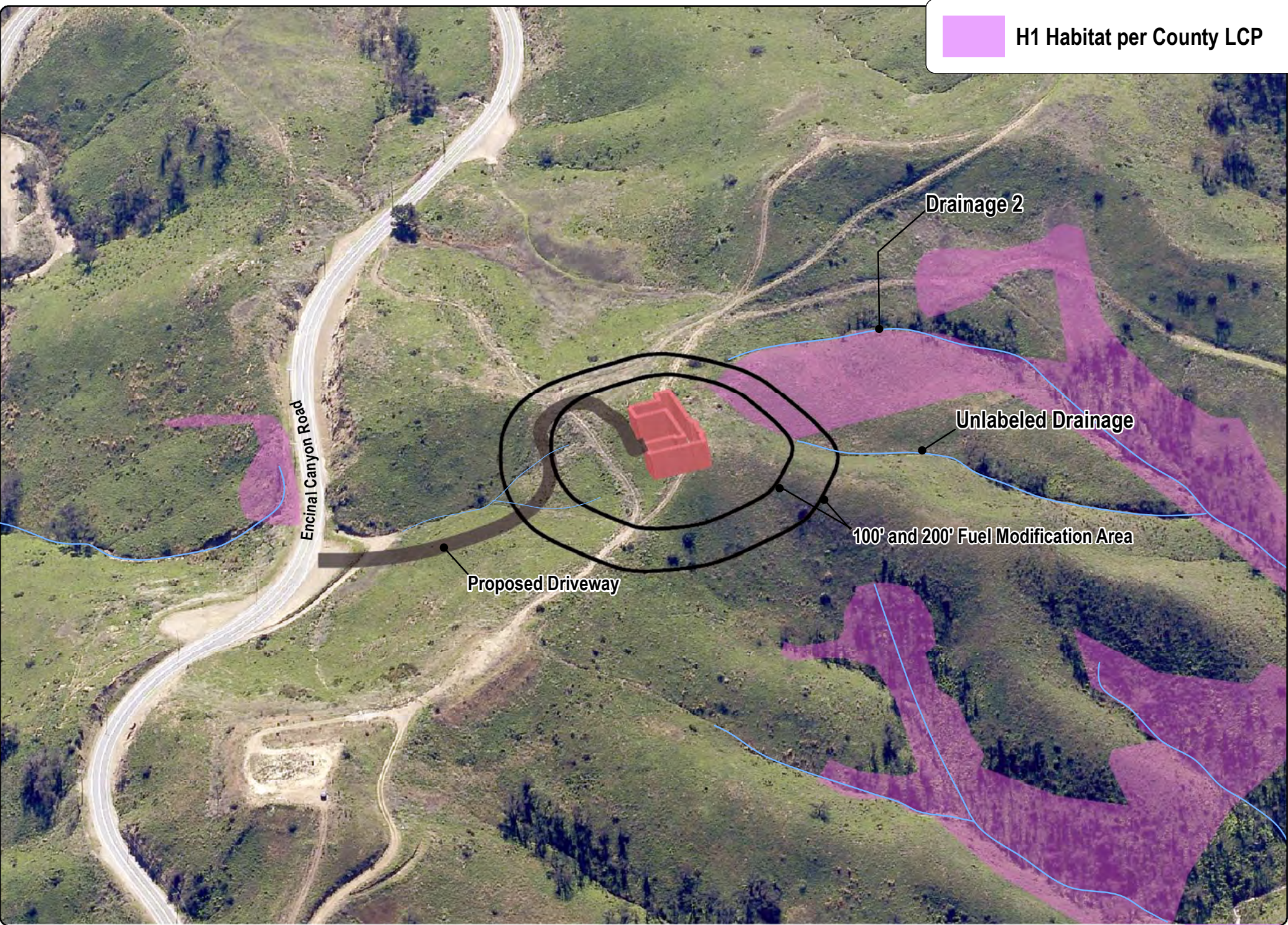
Regional Planning Commission
PN R2015-00089-(3), Major CDP No. RPPL2016004920 and Variance No.
RPPL2016004921
January 23, 2023
Page 5

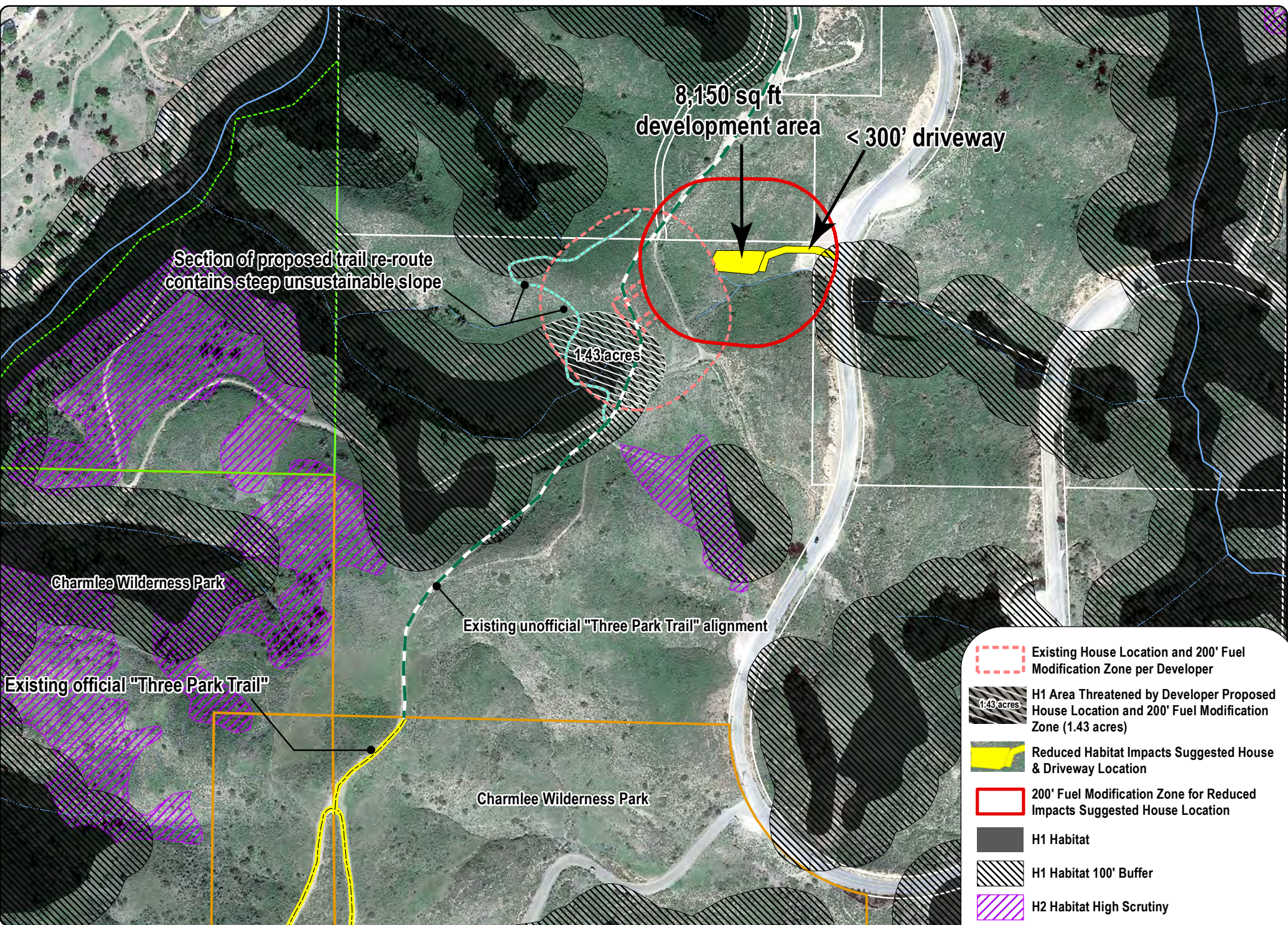
Sincerely,



RUDY ORTEGA
Chairperson

 H1 Habitat per County LCP





8,150 sq ft
development area

< 300' driveway

Section of proposed trail re-route
contains steep unsustainable slope









1.43 acres

Charmlee Wilderness Park

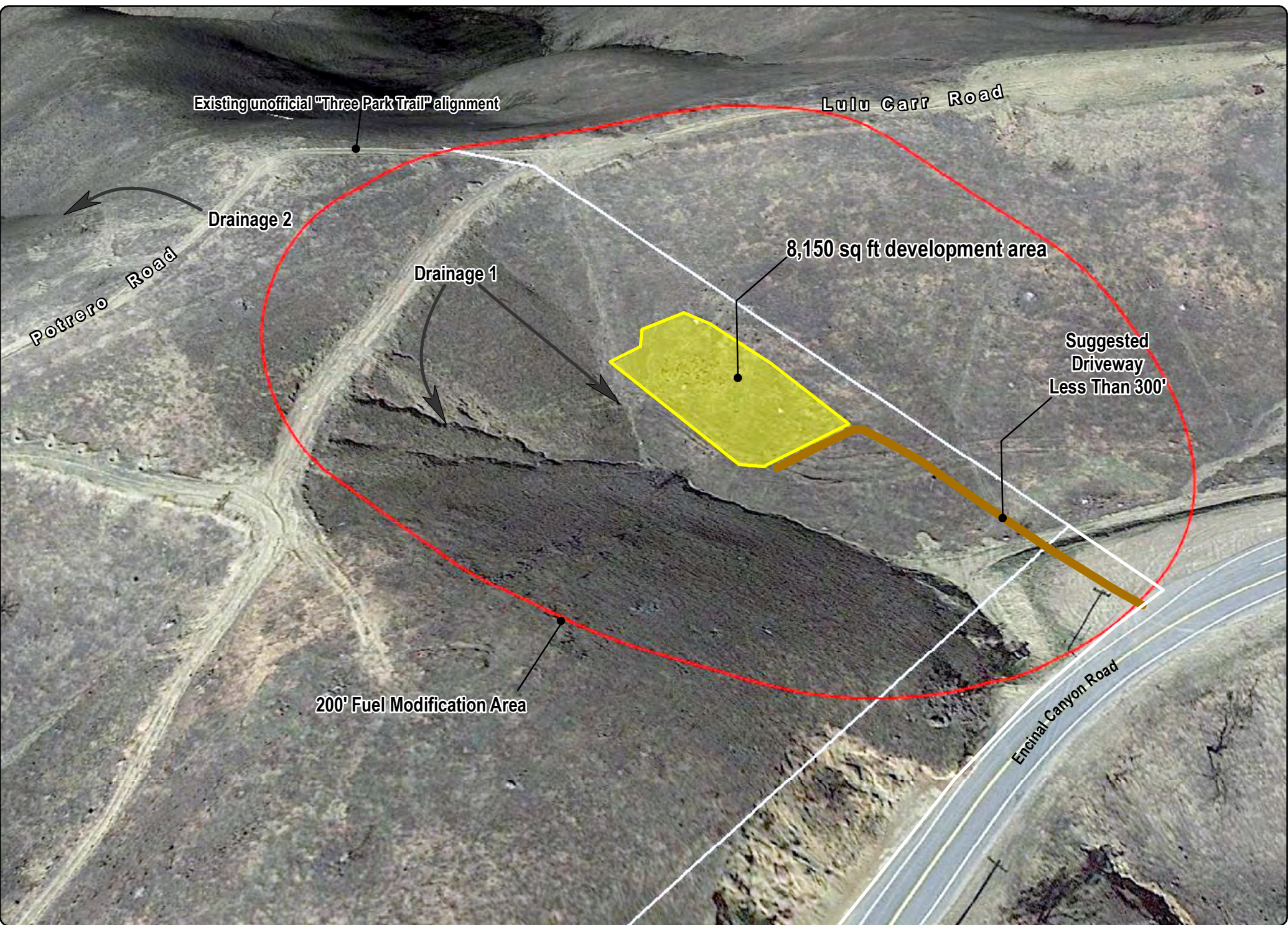
Existing unofficial "Three Park Trail" alignment

Existing official "Three Park Trail"

Charmlee Wilderness Park

-  Existing House Location and 200' Fuel Modification Zone per Developer
-  H1 Area Threatened by Developer Proposed House Location and 200' Fuel Modification Zone (1.43 acres)
-  Reduced Habitat Impacts Suggested House & Driveway Location
-  200' Fuel Modification Zone for Reduced Impacts Suggested House Location
-  H1 Habitat
-  H1 Habitat 100' Buffer
-  H2 Habitat High Scrutiny
-  SMMC MRCA Owned/Managed Property
- Other Public Land





Existing unofficial "Three Park Trail" alignment

Lulu Carr Road

Drainage 2

8,150 sq ft development area

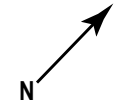
Potrero Road

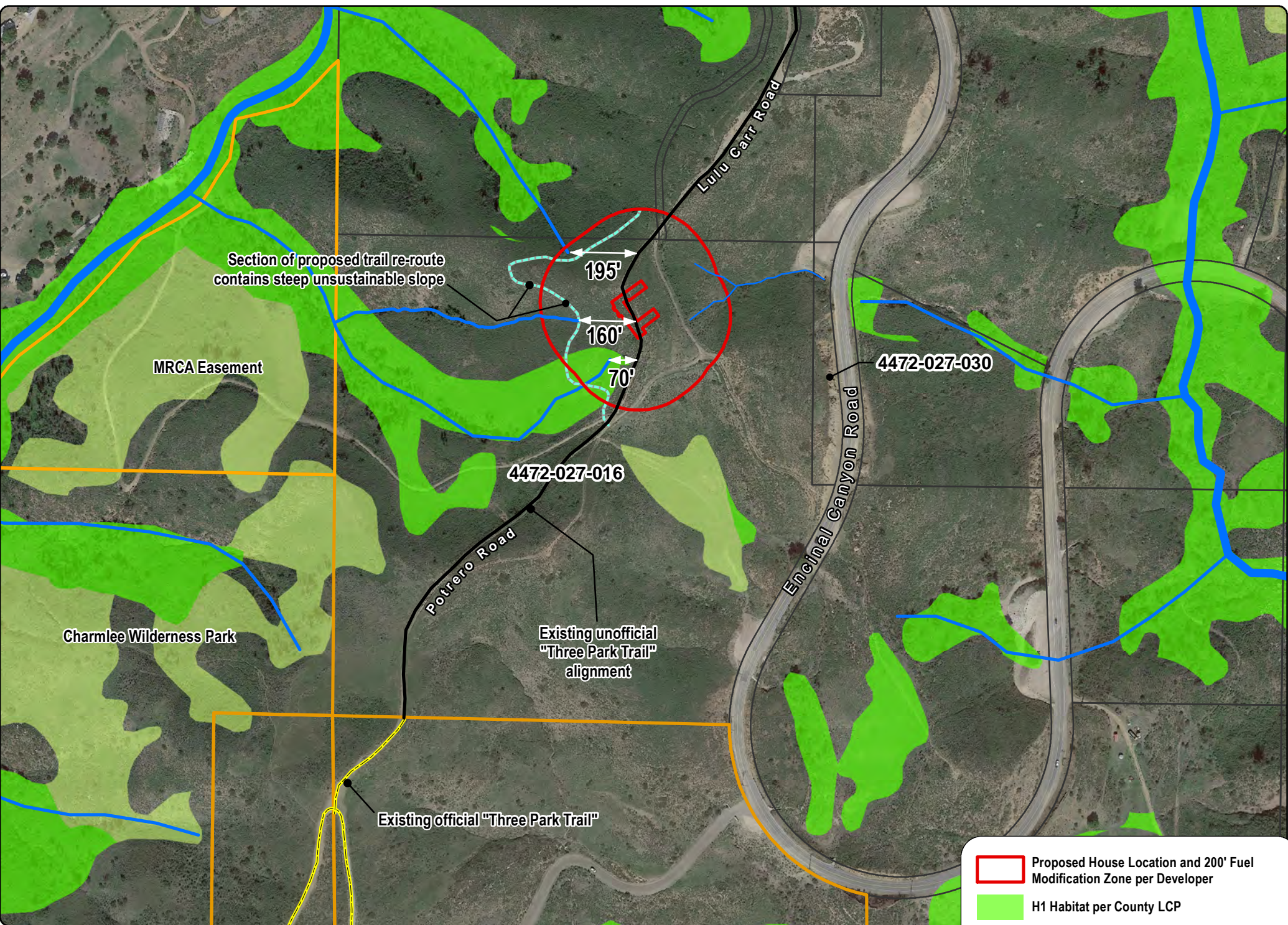
Drainage 1

Suggested Driveway Less Than 300'

200' Fuel Modification Area

Encinal Canyon Road





Section of proposed trail re-route contains steep unsustainable slope

MRCA Easement

Charmlee Wilderness Park

4472-027-016

Potrero Road

Existing unofficial "Three Park Trail" alignment

Existing official "Three Park Trail"

Lulu Carr Road

Encinal Canyon Road

4472-027-030

195'

160'

70'

- Proposed House Location and 200' Fuel Modification Zone per Developer
- H1 Habitat per County LCP
- High Scrutiny H2 Habitat per County LCP
- Public Land & Conservation Easements

