

Griffith Park advocates sue over LA Zoo expansion

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The administrators of the Colonel Griffith Estate sued the city of Los Angeles, alleging that plans to expand its zoo will destroy rare plant species and natural habitat.

They seek a court order vacating the city council's approval until a plan to mitigate concerns identified in the California Environmental Quality Act review is in place, and the public has had ample opportunity to weigh in.

The city does not comment on pending litigation, city attorney's office spokesman Ivor Pine said.

The petition, filed by Michelle Black of Carstens, Black & Minter LLP, in Los Angeles County Superior Court, says that efforts to modernize the zoo and increase its annual capacity from 1.75 million to 3 million visitors will come at the expense of sensitive bat species and other wildlife. These use Griffith Park as a link between the Santa Monica and Verdugo mountains. The zoo is located in Griffith Park.

"The project's plans for the California Planning Area call for the excavation and removal of 16 acres of native California habitat for the iron-

ic purpose of constructing an exhibit to showcase California's wildlife and biodiversity," Black wrote in the complaint filed Sept. 14.

Although the project would introduce "year-round, day and night human activities" to the area, the environmental impact report (EIR) prepared for the project concluded that it would not adversely affect "Griffith Park's biological resources, its recreational values, or public views treasured by Angelenos seeking respite from urban life in the country's second-largest city," Black continued. *Griffith J. Griffith Charitable Trust and Friends of Griffith Park v. City of Los Angeles et al.*, 23STCP03390, (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Sept. 14, 2023).

The plan does require the zoo to mitigate the loss of native vegetation and special status species from each project phase after the completion of 30% of the design plans, but it does not address core issues, Black said in a telephone interview Monday.

"The Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program – everything in there – should be legally binding and enforceable. Our concern is that the mitigation here relies on surveys that have not been performed yet. To us, the analysis required to be

in the EIR and available to the public wasn't available because it hasn't been created," Black said.

City officials made some changes to accommodate concerns raised by Friends of Griffith Park. But some features were too big to ignore, like a 60-foot "Condor Canyon" that the plaintiffs allege would be excavated from the existing ridgeline, Black stated.

The Friends of Griffith Park met a number of times with city officials and submitted written comments on the final environmental impact report, the complaint said.

Making the decision to sue was not easy and they tried to avoid it, said the immediate past president of the Friends of Griffith Park, Marian Dodge. But none of those efforts yielded meaningful results, she continued.

"What they are planning to do is build party and event rental spaces for conferences, workshops, weddings. They're going to increase attendance," she said. "It's nice that they're considering altering their plans but we have nothing in writing. It is just talk."

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