



*Friends of
Knowland Park*

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GROUPS SUE OAKLAND ZOO AND CITY OF OAKLAND OVER INADEQUATE ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW OF THEME PARK DEVELOPMENT

California Native Plant Society and Friends of Knowland Park file lawsuit to require EIR for impacts on sensitive parklands, I-580 traffic congestion, and visual blight

Oakland, Calif. – The California Native Plant Society (CNPS) and Friends of Knowland Park (Friends) today filed a lawsuit against the Oakland Zoo and the City of Oakland. The suit raises concerns about the flawed environmental review process of the Zoo’s planned theme park. The planned expansion is to be sited on the rich, undeveloped lands of Knowland Park. It argues that the City violated the California Environmental Quality Act and State Planning and Zoning Law in its June 2011 approval of the Zoo’s amended development plan.

“It’s ironic that the Oakland Zoo claims to stand for conservation,” said Ruth Malone, co-chair of the Friends of Knowland Park. “The Zoo’s unwillingness to go through a full environmental review process for this project is just shocking. Since the City Council shirked its duty to analyze reasonable alternatives, we were left with no options but to sue to get them to follow the law.”

The lawsuit notes that the Zoo significantly changed its development plans since first receiving approval by the Oakland City Council in 1998. The expansion was approved with limited environmental review at that time. CNPS and Friends have long argued that the changes to the theme park plan merit a full Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The City Council opted instead to accept a lower standard of environmental review, which allowed the updated plan to move forward without considering less damaging alternatives.

The amendment recently approved by the City Council includes massive changes to the 1998 Master Plan. Changes include the addition of a new 17,000 square foot veterinary hospital. The new plan calls for increasing the size of an Interpretive Center by two stories and more than four times the square footage, and it moves the center to a visually intrusive spot on a ridgeline. The amendment calls for a new aerial gondola ride and overnight camping area for 100 campers. Animal exhibits have also been placed over biologically sensitive areas.

The Oakland Zoo is located within Knowland Park, which is owned by the City of Oakland. Knowland Park is home to some of the East Bay’s most sensitive native habitat for both flora and fauna and is considered a biological hotspot. The Zoo’s new project will likely significantly damage this sensitive habitat.

“We have expressed our concerns every step of the way about the significant environmental impacts the Zoo’s development is likely to have on native plants and animals,” said Laura Baker of the East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. “Research shows that once these rare grasslands are disturbed, they are unlikely to recover. If the Zoo were truly concerned about conservation, it would at least explore the possibility of a more compact plan that would do less damage to the sensitive native habitat that surrounds it.”

The Zoo’s conversion to theme park of 57 acres of wild lands would likely damage the habitat of the federally protected Alameda whipsnake. Since the first environmental review was done more than a decade ago, a population of whipsnakes has been verified to live within the Zoo’s proposed project site in Knowland Park. Since that time, scientists have also learned more about how difficult it is to mitigate damage to native grasslands. New features included in the site plan are also likely to attract more visitors to the park, leading to increased traffic congestion that was not adequately analyzed in the environmental review process.

“The Zoo’s amended Master Plan is so different from the earlier version of the document that it should be considered a new project under the California Environmental Quality Act,” said attorney Catherine Engberg of Shute, Mihaly and Weinberger, who represents the plaintiffs in the case. “The City Council should not have approved this project without a vigorous exploration of alternatives. This lawsuit asks the City and the Zoo to take a harder look at the damage that would be done if the expansion goes forward as planned, and to explore opportunities for fulfilling the Zoo’s mission without destroying the sensitive habitat in Knowland Park.”

The lawsuit filed today with the Alameda County Superior Court calls for the City to require the Zoo to complete a full EIR before the expansion can move forward. It includes a request for a Temporary Restraining Order and Injunction that would require the Zoo to halt construction of its new veterinary hospital, which began last week, until the appropriate environmental review is completed.

About Friends of Knowland Park (www.knowlandpark.com)

Friends of Knowland Park is an association of environmentalists, neighborhood groups, and concerned citizens from throughout the Bay Area, brought together by the common wish to preserve and protect the natural resources of Knowland Park for future generations.

About CNPS (www.cnps.org)

The California Native Plant Society, through its nearly 10,000 members and 33 regional chapters, has been working to represent the public’s interest in protecting California’s beautiful native plants and their habitats since 1965. Run by professional staff and volunteers, CNPS is a 501(c)3 organization active in promoting public education about native plants and the use of sound plant science in advocating for conservation of natural areas throughout the State of California.

About Shute, Mihaly and Weinberger LLP (www.smwlaw.com)

Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger specializes in government, land use, natural resource and environmental law. Since 1980, the firm has provided representation to public agencies and community groups throughout California. Known for its commitment to promoting environmental and community values, SMW is at the forefront of the major land use and development issues facing California today.

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