



**DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING  
RECOMMENDATION REPORT**



**CITY PLANNING COMMISSION**

**DATE:** February 12, 2009  
**TIME:** After 8:30 a.m.\*  
**PLACE:** City Hall, Room 1010  
 200 North Spring Street  
 Los Angeles, CA 90012

**CASE NO:**  
**CEQA:**

CPC-2007-3036-CA  
 ENV-2007-3037-MND

**LOCATION:**  
**COUNCIL DISTRICTS:**  
**PLAN AREAS:**

Los Angeles River Vicinity  
 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14  
 Canoga Park – Winnetka –  
 Woodland Hills – West Hills,  
 Reseda – W. Van Nuys, Encino –  
 Tarzana, Van Nuys – N. Sherman  
 Oaks, Sherman Oaks – Studio  
 City – Toluca Lake – Cahuenga  
 Pass, Hollywood, NE Los Angeles,  
 Silverlake – Echo Park, Central  
 City North, Boyle Heights

**PUBLIC HEARING NOT REQUIRED**

**REQUEST:** Establishment of the Los Angeles River Improvement Overlay District (LA-RIO) District.

**SUMMARY:** To establish the Los Angeles River Improvement Overlay (LA-RIO) (Appendix A), which will implement the first River Improvement Overlay District (RIO). The LA-RIO consists of a required point system for new development near the Los Angeles River to implement design standards and guidelines that foster improved private property and public right of way development with regard to watershed, urban design, and mobility. In addition the LA-RIO includes green street standards and guidelines for public and private streets to increase pedestrian and bicycle safety and accessibility, increase native habitat areas, and increase opportunities to treat and infiltrate stormwater.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

1. **Adopt** the staff report as its report on the subject.
2. **Adopt** the attached findings and recommend adoption by the City Council.
3. **Approve** the Mitigated Negative Declaration as the CEQA clearance on the subject and recommend its adoption by the City Council.
4. **Approve** the proposed ordinance (Appendix A) and recommend adoption by City Council.

S. GAIL GOLDBERG, AICP  
 Director of Planning

JANE BLUMENFELD  
 Principal City Planner

CLAIRE BOWIN, AICP, LEED-AP  
 City Planner, River Unit

JOHN M. DUGAN, AICP  
 Deputy Director

THOMAS ROTHMANN  
 City Planner

DEBORAH KAHEN  
 Planning Assistant, River Unit  
 (213) 978-1395

**ADVICE TO PUBLIC:** \*The exact time this report will be considered during the meeting is uncertain since there may be several other items on the agenda. Written communications may be mailed to the *Commission Secretariat, 200 North Main Street, Room 532, Los Angeles, CA 90012* (Phone No. 213/978-1300). While all written communications are given to the Commission for consideration, the initial packets are sent to the week prior to the Commission's meeting date. If you challenge these agenda items in court, you may be limited to raising only those issues you or someone else raised at the public hearing agendaized herein, or in written correspondence on these matters delivered to this agency at or prior to the public hearing. As a covered entity under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the City of Los Angeles does not discriminate on the basis of disability, and upon request, will provide reasonable accommodation to ensure equal access to this programs, services and activities. Sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, or other auxiliary aids and/or other services may be provided upon request. To ensure availability of services, please make your request no later than three working days (72 hours) prior to the meeting by calling the Commission Secretariat at 213/978-1300.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proposed ordinance (Appendix A) establishes the Los Angeles River Improvement Overlay (LA-RIO) District as a guideline for new and significantly rehabilitated projects located within its boundaries, which extend approximately one-half to one mile from both sides of the 32-mile long portion of the river within the City limits. The related proposed ordinance (Case Number CPC-2008-3125-CA) establishes the RIO as enabling legislation for a supplemental use district for waterways. The proposed ordinance (Appendix A) implements that enabling legislation by establishing the first of these districts for the Los Angeles River.

The Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP) was adopted by City Council in May, 2007 along with 25 directives to City, County, and Federal agencies to begin its implementation. One of those directives instructed the Department of City Planning to establish the LA-RIO as a pedestrian and ecologically friendly interface between existing communities and the River. As such, the Planning Department developed the LA-RIO guidelines and standards by focusing on the cleansing and replenishment of the watershed and through the refinement of urban design, and mobility options for projects near the River.

The LA-RIO has three components, all of which address project design: the Property Improvement Guidelines, Complete Green Street Standards, and Complete Green Street Guidelines. The Property Improvement Guidelines establishes a point system in which a minimum number of points within three categories (watershed, urban design, and mobility) are required for individual projects within the LA-RIO boundaries. The Complete Green Street Standards and the Complete Green Street Guidelines establish new design requirements and guidelines for public and private streets to increase pedestrian and bicycle safety and accessibility, increase native habitat areas, and increase opportunities to treat and infiltrate stormwater.

## STAFF REPORT

### REQUEST

The City Council adopted a master plan for the revitalization of the Los Angeles River known as the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP) in May, 2007. As part of that action, the City Council directed the Department of City Planning to implement an overlay zone to create an interface between the Los Angeles River and the communities that lie adjacent to it. The proposed ordinance (Appendix A) implements the City Council directive.

### BACKGROUND

Prior to its channelization, the Los Angeles River flowed freely through the City from the confluence of Bell Creek and the Arroyo Calabasas in today's Canoga Park community to its entry into the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach. Subject to wide fluctuations in volume and velocity, the River often breached its banks and flooded large portions of the Los Angeles Basin. In 1938, the River overflowed its banks and caused over \$40 million in damage and 113 deaths, thereby hastening the perception that engineering its course would minimize the risk of another catastrophe. The subsequent construction of the channel by the Army Corps of Engineers was to accommodate 50-year magnitude storms and was a monumental engineering feat. In 1960 the channelization of the River was completed.

This channelization transformed the Los Angeles River into the spine of the City's expanding storm drainage system. However, over time, the channel became a neglected urban landscape while its banks attracted a high concentration of blighted land uses. The environmental condition continued to worsen as Los Angeles became denser. Extensive non-porous citywide paving diverted larger amounts of stormwater runoff into the River, resulting in increased water pollution.

### DISCUSSION

Over the past two decades, the City and other organizations have engaged in efforts to revitalize the Los Angeles River and its watershed. The City has invested in parks, bike paths, bridges, street improvements, and other projects. Los Angeles County has begun to implement its own Los Angeles River Master Plan, adopted by the County Board of Supervisors in 1996. California's Conservancies and California State Parks have fostered the creation of numerous new open space amenities in the River Corridor—notably the establishment of the Los Angeles State Historic Park at the Cornfields and the Río de Los Angeles State Park at Taylor Yard.

In June, 2002, the City Council established the Los Angeles River Ad Hoc Committee to coordinate the various revitalization efforts, including promoting linkages between projects with education, litter removal, job creation, community development, tourism, civic pride, and improved water quality. In March, 2006, the Department of City Planning established the River Unit in its Citywide Division to work with the existing Los Angeles River interagency task force in drafting the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP).

The task force, led by the Bureau of Engineering and directed by the City Council's Ad Hoc River Committee, coordinated the efforts of River stakeholders and government agencies in outlining a vision for revitalizing the concrete-lined river and the areas surrounding it. The LARRMP was adopted by City Council in May 2007 along with 25 directives to City, County, and Federal agencies to begin its implementation. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers participated with the City in drafting the LARRMP and is now engaged in several studies to explore opportunities for channel modification that will support ecosystem restoration within selected areas of the River.

With the adoption of the LARRMP, the Department of City Planning was directed by the City Council to create a River Improvement Overlay District for the Los Angeles River (LA-RIO). The LA-RIO

provides guidelines and standards for all new development and significant rehabilitation projects located within its boundaries to enhance the watershed, urban design, and mobility options within the area. The LA-RIO does not propose a specific built project, change or restrict existing zoning, land use, or intensity of land use, nor does it grant new rights to land not zoned for development. While the LA-RIO does not alter any zoning, it is intended to refine the manner in which buildings are sited and designed such that they are more sensitive to the River and the surrounding neighborhood context as defined in the LARRMP.

## LA-RIO

The LA-RIO (Appendix A) parallels the Los Angeles River, which flows 32 miles through the City from its origin in Canoga Park to the boundary with Vernon City. The LA-RIO intersects ten Council Districts (Districts 3, 12, 6, 2, 5, 4, 13, 1, 9, and 14, respectively from northwest to southeast), 20 Certified Neighborhood Councils, and 10 Community Plan Areas as follows (in geographic order from northwest to southeast): Canoga Park-Winnetka-Woodland Hills-West Hills; Reseda-West Van Nuys; Encino-Tarzana; Van Nuys-North Sherman Oaks; Sherman Oaks-Studio City-Toluca Lake-Cahuenga Pass; Hollywood; Northeast Los Angeles; Silver Lake-Echo Park; Central City North; and Boyle Heights. Due to the geographical extent of the River, the properties within the boundaries of the LA-RIO include single-family neighborhoods, multiple-family neighborhoods, commercial corridors, industrial zones, and recreational areas.

The LA-RIO establishes Property Improvement Guidelines (Property Guidelines), Complete Green Street Standards (Street Standards) and Complete Green Street Guidelines (Street Guidelines). Proposed projects in the LA-RIO will incur a fee of no more than \$300 for compliance reviews on the requisite number of points from the Property Guidelines, and the satisfaction of appropriate standards from the Street Standards. The fee for the compliance review for Single Family Projects will be no more than \$200. Relief from these requirements can be sought through a Director's Determination.

### Property Improvement Guidelines

The Property Improvement Guidelines (Property Guidelines) (Section 5 of Appendix A) will require the incorporation of appropriate river-related features into all ministerial and discretionary new construction and/or major renovation projects. Given the enormity of land area and the wide variety of land uses contained within the proposed LA-RIO boundaries, a universal approach to design guidelines is not possible. Instead, these projects must be designed to address a wide variety of goals by achieving a minimum number of points by selecting from a list of design options, each of which carries a point value. The provision of a flexible point system enables the LA-RIO to address a wide variety of goals while allowing developers to select the points best suited to their project and specific site conditions. The point system provides a maximum of 99 points from which projects are required to comply with 10-20 of the points depending upon the nature of the project.

Points are divided into the three subcategories: Watershed, Urban Design, and Mobility. Single family homes must achieve a minimum of 10 points and are required to obtain points from the Watershed category only. All other projects are required to achieve 20 points. Each category provides many options for achieving the requisite number of points, so that there is maximum flexibility for compliance throughout the 32 miles.

The point system has three components: Watershed, Urban Design and Mobility Alternatives. The Watershed category provides a total of 50 point options, the Urban Design category provides for 26 point options and the Mobility category provides for a total of 23 point options.

### *Watershed*

Watershed protection is critical to improving the quality of the water in the River and ultimately the Pacific Ocean, as well as becoming more self reliant for water sources. Each new project

within the LA-RIO will be required to obtain 10 points within the Watershed category. The Watershed category is divided into seven subcategories, which include: Stormwater Management, Stream Enhancement, Landscaping, Water Conservation, Hardscape, Landscape/Hardscape Maintenance, and Open Space. There are a total of 50 point options available from these seven subcategories.

*Stormwater Management*

The intent is to reduce the velocities, quantities, and pollutant loads of stormwater runoff entering the stormdrain system and ultimately the Pacific Ocean, and to increase opportunities for stormwater runoff to infiltrate into the groundsoils. Points are achieved for permeable pavement and raingardens, which permit the stormwater to drain into the earth where natural filtration can occur.

*Stream Enhancement*

The intent is to improve surface and ground water quality and increase groundwater recharge, and to support vegetation, wildlife, and the transport of sedimentation. Points are achieved for daylighting a portion of a stream that runs through a property or removing concrete from a portion of a channel.

*Landscaping*

The intent is to increase the percentage of native and drought tolerant plant species located within the vicinity of the Los Angeles River, which ultimately increases the availability of native and locally adaptive habitats to support the migration of local species. Points are achieved by implementing graywater systems and the use of high-efficiency irrigation systems.

*Water Conservation*

The intent is to reduce the use of potable water for irrigation purposes. Points are achieved by employing the use of a graywater system or a high-efficiency irrigation system.

*Hardscape*

The intent is to reduce the overall ambient temperature and increase the percentage of pervious materials. A project earns points for minimizing the percentage of hardscape area and for the incorporation of permeable materials.

*Landscape/Hardscape Maintenance*

The intent is to encourage maintenance practices that reduce the use of chemicals, nuisance plants, and potable water. A project earns points for eliminating the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides and for keeping surfaces clean of chemical residues and debris.

*Open Space*

The intent is to increase the availability of publicly accessible area adjacent to the River Greenway (the River right of way). Projects earn points by granting an easement for public access that is coterminous with the River.

*Urban Design*

The incorporation of basic urban design tenets will improve the appearance of properties within the vicinity of the River, ultimately improving and promoting pedestrian mobility and safety throughout the River Corridor and neighborhoods. Each new project, with the exception of single family homes, will be required to obtain five points within the Urban Design category. The Urban Design category is divided into four subcategories, which include Vehicle Parking, Transparency, Site Lighting, and Visual Clutter. There are a total of 26 point options available

from these 4 subcategories.

*Vehicle Parking*

The intent is to reduce visibility and prominence of vehicles in and around the River Greenway area. A project earns points by screening surface parking that would otherwise be visible from the River Greenway.

*Transparency*

The intent is to promote visibility between occupants of Greenway/street adjacent uses and the River Greenway and/or streets to increase safety, and comfort, of area. Points are earned by keeping a percentage of building walls transparent.

*Site Lighting*

The intent is to reduce nighttime light pollution, conserve energy and improve nighttime safety and visibility. Projects earn points by installing lighting fixtures that prevent upward light pollution and/or offsite glare.

*Visual Clutter*

The intent is to reduce visual pollution in and around the River Greenway. Projects earn points by screening mechanical equipment and trash/recyclables areas from public view.

*Mobility*

By increasing the mobility options of the areas near the River, residents will be able to access more local destinations, including the River, without a vehicle. Each new project, with the exception of single family homes, will be required to obtain five points within the Mobility category. The Mobility category is divided into four subcategories, which include Connectivity, Pedestrian, Transit, Bicycle, and Vehicular. There are a total of 23 point options available from these 4 subcategories.

*Connectivity*

The intent is to enable the River to become another "front-door," and to facilitate pedestrian access from the street and/or River Greenway to the building. A project would earn a point, for example, by providing a public entrance to the building that is accessible from the River Greenway.

*Pedestrian*

The intent is to increase pedestrian access to and from the buildings and neighborhoods adjoining the River Greenway. Points are available for projects that, for example, build and maintain a public pedestrian paseo that connects to the River, or provide access to and from the River Greenway for pedestrians and bicyclists.

*Transit*

The intent is to encourage public transportation as a form of travel to, from and around the River and adjoining neighborhoods. Points are achieved for posting information on local public transportation options.

*Bicycle*

The intent is to promote and support bicycling and other forms of two-wheeled transportation through improved amenities. A project earns points by providing on-site bicycle storage facilities and/or changing/showering facilities.

*Vehicular*

The intent is to accommodate means of transportation other than conventional, single occupancy automobiles. Projects that designate parking spots for car-share programs or provide electrical charging stations earn points.

Complete Green Street Standards

The Complete Green Street Standards (Street Standards) (Section 6 of Appendix A) provide for a series of public right-of-way improvements between the property line and the edge of the curb and will apply to all new projects within the LA-RIO with the exception of single family homes.

The Street Standards address the LARRMP recommendation to introduce “green streets” features into areas near the River, improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity to the communities around the River, and improve the overall watershed management of the area.

The term Complete Green Streets blends two street design typologies; the Complete Street and the Green Street. Complete Streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and bus riders of all ages and abilities are able to safely move along and across a complete street. Green Streets are designed to infiltrate and treat stormwater by cleansing it through gravel, soil and plants. Green Streets are also designed to increase the tree canopy and to support native habitat through landscaping in the parkways and medians.

The Street Standards are designed to enhance the experience of pedestrians and bicyclists, and will require all Projects, with the exception of Single Family Projects, to install pedestrian street lights, bicycle racks, street trees, and native landscaping within existing parkways.

*Pedestrian Street Lights*

A project shall install a number of pedestrian street lights proportionate to the project’s street frontage.

*Bicycle Racks*

A project shall install bicycle racks in suitable locations.

*Trees*

A project shall plant a number of trees proportionate to the project’s street frontage.

*Landscaping*

Where a parkway exists, a project shall plant native landscaping.

Complete Green Street Guidelines

The Complete Green Street Guidelines (Street Guidelines) (Section 7 of Appendix A) also support the LARRMP recommendation to introduce “green streets” features by proposing environmental impact mitigation measures that improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity to the communities around the River, and improving the overall watershed management of the area.

The Street Guidelines provide direction for future public right-of-way improvements that are undertaken as a result of or in conjunction with capital improvements. They are also intended to provide decision makers with potential options for mitigating the environmental impacts of specific projects when identified through the California Environmental Quality Act. The Street Guidelines are divided into five subcategories: Pedestrian Scale Improvement, Water Conservation, Street Calming, Bike Lanes, and Transit Amenity Improvement.



*Pedestrian Scale Improvement*

These measures focus on enhancing the pedestrian experience in order to facilitate non-vehicular traffic near and across the river. Examples include providing pedestrian street crossings and increasing the parkway and/or sidewalk width.

*Water Conservation*

These measures promote infiltration of stormwater and dry-weather run off. Examples include redesigning cul-de-sacs and vacated streets into pocket parks that are designed to infiltrate stormwater, or designing the parkway to assist in the treatment and infiltration of stormwater and dry-weather run off from the sidewalk and street.

*Street Calming*

These measures focus on managing traffic in ways that encourage multi-modal means of transportation. Such techniques include slowing vehicular traffic with traffic circles, and permitting on-street parking in active pedestrian zones.

*Bike Lanes*

These measures enhance bicycle safety and accessibility. Examples include developing bikeways on streets and developing a portion of the River bikeway.

*Transit Amenity Improvement*

These measures seek to improve transit stop amenities in order to promote safer and more comfortable travel by public transportation. Examples include installing a bus shelter and increasing the sidewalk width.

OUTREACH

The LA-RIO is the direct result of a series of meetings and workshops that took place during and after the development of the LARRMP. The meetings and workshops included discussions with numerous stakeholders which included representatives from all of the neighborhood councils that are within close proximity to the River, environmentalists, equestrian advocates, homeowners, industrial property owners, multi-family residential developers, as well as business organizations. The discussions included topics such as the width of the LA-RIO, the relevance of including tributaries within the LA-RIO boundaries, and the types of design guidelines that future projects should need to comply with in order to meet some of the goals and objectives of the LARRMP. Workshop participants were asked to draw suggested boundaries on maps and were asked to prioritize potential guidelines. Following these initial meetings and workshops, and the adoption of the LARRMP a draft LA-RIO was developed.

This first draft of the LA-RIO was presented to the public in eight separate workshops during the Summer of 2007. The workshops were held on four Saturdays during July and August within distinct geographical sections of the River. On each of the four Saturdays, one workshop was held within the Valley area (east-west) and a second workshop was held in parallel within the Elysian Valley/Downtown (north-south) stretch of the River. A total of 131 persons participated in the eight workshops and their verbal and written comments are reflected in the proposed draft of the LA-RIO. Additional comments were received following the distribution of the Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) and many of those comments were also incorporated into the current draft.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

The Planning Department held two joint public hearings on the RIO district and the LA-RIO on December 12, 2008 in the San Fernando Valley and on December 15, 2008 in Downtown Los Angeles. There were a total of seven speakers. The general comments concerned procedural

matters with regard to the LA-RIO, statements of vision about the Los Angeles River, and overall support for the RIO concept and the LA-RIO in particular.

Outreach for the public hearings was far-reaching. An advertisement for the hearing was published in 13 newspapers serving communities by the River. A Community Notice was sent to all Neighborhood Councils, and notices were distributed at the quarterly public River Update Meeting hosted by the Los Angeles River interagency task force, posted on the lariver.org website, and sent to newspapers across the City as a request for posting in the Community Calendar (or similar) section. Notification of the public hearings was also sent to a list of over 1,000 individuals who were either participants at past LA-RIO workshops, LARRMP stakeholders, and/or interested parties.

## **CONCLUSION**

At a time of renewed urban investment and environmental awareness, many cities throughout the country have been restoring their deteriorated urban waterways into recaptured oases. The LA-RIO, along with other LARRMP strategies, brings Los Angeles to the forefront of this movement.

Since the middle of the last century the primary function of the Los Angeles River has been to serve the City's stormwater drainage system, and the streets have been largely relegated to the movement of private vehicles. As a result, river adjacent neighborhoods have been physically and psychologically disconnected from the River and their neighboring streets. While the River and the streets will continue to provide these functions, they hold tremendous potential as active public places that can support multiple modes of transportation and meet multiple goals. River amphitheatres and major boulevards can also be the stage for public events and celebrations. Our streets and our River can convey pedestrians and bicyclists on errands to neighborhood shops, the library, school, museums, parks and the grocery store. They can be places to stroll, jog, bicycle, skateboard or gather and chat alongside developments that nurture a River-friendly environment. The LA-RIO will facilitate the transformation of our River as a civic asset and streets as public places, incorporating the neighborhood qualities and amenities that will elevate the quality of life for both the residents of, and visitors to, Los Angeles.

**ATTACHMENT 1 – FINDINGS**

The City Planning Department recommends that the City Planning Commission, find:

1. In accordance with Charter Section 556, the proposed ordinance (Appendix A) is in substantial conformance with the purposes, intent and provisions of the General Plan. The proposed ordinance will positively contribute to the improvement of water quality and supply and the provision of ecological corridors for birds and wildlife as defined in Chapter 6 of the Open Space and Conservation Element; and will promote effective and efficient approaches to reducing stormwater runoff and protecting water quality as defined in Objective 9.6 of Chapter 9 of the Framework Element of the General Plan; and
2. in accordance with Charter Section 558 (b)(2), the proposed ordinance (Appendix A) will be in conformity with the public necessity, convenience, general welfare, and good zoning practice in that it will contribute toward protecting the City's natural settings from the effects of the encroachment of urban development as defined in Objective 6.1 of Chapter 6 of the Framework Element of the General Plan; and will protect and enhance the diversity and sustainability of the natural ecologies of the Santa Monica and San Pedro bays by requiring that future development near and along the Los Angeles River provide watershed protection and revitalization measures in accordance with the City's Conservation Element of the General Plan; and
3. in accordance with Charter Section 558 (b)(2) and the City's General Plan Framework Objective 6.2, the proposed ordinance (Appendix A) will maximize the use of the City's existing open space network and recreation facilities by providing connections to them. The LA-RIO will provide a variety of urban design measures that promote safe pedestrian and bicycle access to the Los Angeles River; and
4. in accordance with Charter Section 558 (b)(2) and the City's General Plan Framework Objective 6.4, the proposed ordinance (Appendix A) will ensure that the City's open spaces contribute positively to the stability and identity of the communities and neighborhoods in which they are located or through which they pass by encouraging a positive interface between the Los Angeles River and its adjacent properties. The LA-RIO will encourage developments to include entryways that face the River to increase visibility and the safety of River Greenway users; and
5. in accordance with Charter Section 558 (b)(2), the proposed ordinance (Appendix A) will have no adverse effect upon the General Plan, specific plans, or any other plans being created by the Department of City Planning because the proposed ordinance is consistent with the General Plan and carries out the General Plan goals, policies and objectives discussed above.

**ENVIRONMENTAL FINDING**

A Mitigated Negative Declaration (ENV-2007-3037-MND) was prepared for the proposed project. On the basis of the whole of the record before the lead agency including any comments received, the lead agency finds that, with imposition of the mitigation measures described in the MND, there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment.

However, the following mitigation measures shall not be imposed as they were included in error in the MND. The LA-RIO does not build a specific project. Therefore, no construction is associated with this project. Therefore, the following mitigation measures shall not be imposed:

- Noise Mitigation Measures

Upon further analysis, the Department of City Planning has determined that there is no conflict between the LA-RIO and cultural Resources. Therefore, the following category of the Initial Checklist should be amended as follows:

- The removal of the comment "Project plans may conflict with cultural resources." The finding of "Less Than Significant with Mitigation" remains the same.

The attached Mitigated Negative Declaration (Appendix B) reflects the lead agency's independent judgment and analysis. For the reasons set forth in the attached Mitigated Negative Declaration, the project will not have a significant effect on the environment. Staff hereby recommends adoption of the Mitigated Negative Declaration, with the revisions stated above.