

Conditional Use Permit Would Override Zoning and Put Desert Community and Wildlife At Risk

by Louise Goffin

A “glampsite” (a common term for glamour campsite) development known as Flamingo 640 is seeking a Conditional Use Permit from San Bernardino County that would allow an override of existing residential land-use zoning to a commercial application. This proposed project has created a stir among environment and wildlife protection agencies, along with residents who already feel besieged by the recent additions of hundreds of short-term rentals throughout the area. A music venue and a helicopter pad are also considered within the proposed project.

Residents opposing Flamingo 640 have found an ally in the Mojave Desert Land Trust. The MDLT has taken stewardship to conserve more than 100,000 acres of prime desert habitat since it was established in 2007. Kelly Herbinson, Joint Executive Director of the Mojave Desert Land Trust, describes one of many problems with the proposed development. “Protecting wildlife corridors is becoming increasingly important as development pressure increases on the Morongo Basin,” says Herbinson. “Those corridors act as arteries between our National Parks and Wilderness Areas providing migration corridors necessary for the long-term protection of our desert ecosystem.”

RoBott Land Company – developers of the controversial project – is a private real estate firm based in Beverly Hills. They specialize in land acquisition, development, and financing, offering investors “access to a broad spectrum of land opportunities.” Many feel that RBLC's goal of large resale profits at such a cost to locals and their valued environment is a clear breach of the zoning protections created by the County of San Bernardino.

Derek Girling lives within 400 feet of the site. “The property had an acquisition cost well below commercial market value because it was bought in a residential zone. To change the property zoning would irrevocably affect the residents of the entire area in order to satisfy the objectives of a single out-of-county investment group.” Girling has photos of tortoises and desert foxes in the area.

One of many concerns is highway safety. The entrance to Flamingo 640 comes from Old Woman Springs Road, a winding, undivided two-lane arterial route with extended blind spots and poor traffic visibility. It is already known to be perilous, with extreme caution needed when entering and exiting the normal flow of traffic. The addition of 400 extra daily visitors to the proposed site creates a danger and a nuisance.

Chris Clarke, an Associate Director at the National Parks Conservation Association, has lived in the California Desert since 2008 and works with desert communities to protect national parks. “The developers and the county have been doing a slipshod job of surveying the environmental impact on wildlife. They say there are no tortoises and there are,” says Clarke. “They have not adequately addressed the impact on traffic. Ambulances and law enforcement already struggle with their response times.”

Homeowner Charles Moore has lived 660 feet from the site for the last 14 years. “The 640-acre property is subject to flooding and therefore not usable for development. Wildfires are always a risk here, where it’s not uncommon to have 20-30 mph winds,” says Moore. “Flamingo 640 impact study minimizes the obvious threat to protected species. I have personally seen tortoises and the parcel is also home to hundreds if not thousands

of endangered Joshua trees.”

The need for housing and recreation locations for tourists visiting the area is not ignored by those seeking to protect wildlife and highway safety. The MDLT assists developments that seek solutions to minimizing impacts to the environment and community.

Residents and agencies taking issue with Flamingo 640’s environmental report insist that the County Board of Supervisors require a CEQA Environmental Impact Report, citing the incredible scope of this project, and the irreversible potential harm it could bring to this area if approved.

All persons wishing to voice their concerns may write jim.Morrissey@lus.sbcounty.gov

The public review period ends on April 21st.