

August 14, 2023

Attention: Los Angeles City Planning Commission

RE: Harvard-Westlake River Park Project (Case Numbers: CPC-2020-1511-VCU-SPR and ENV-2020-1512-EIR)

Dear Commissioner Millman and Honorable City Planning Commissioners,

I am writing to share my feedback in anticipation of the Harvard-Westlake River Park Project (Project) being before the City Planning Commission on August 24, 2023. While this effort predates my time in office by many years, I am encouraged at the high level of engagement by community stakeholders, city departments, local and regional elected officials, and the applicant on this significant and dynamic development proposal.

We are proud to have welcomed most of Studio City into Council District 4 following the recent redistricting process. We inherited a Project that has gone through many changes in the last decade, under contentious circumstances at times. Occupied by a private nine-hole, 27-par golf course and tennis facility, the site was purchased by Harvard-Westlake School from the family that owned and operated Weddington Golf and Tennis in 2017 for the purpose of redesigning, building, and operating an athletic and recreational facility for the School's students and the general public. The sale and purchase took place after previous proposals for the 16-acre property by the Weddington family, such as one which included preservation of golfing and tennis on the site while adding housing units, failed to move forward because of community opposition to adding any housing to the site.

As we do for nearly every development project and policy effort that affects Council District 4, and as part of our values around transparency and trust-building, my staff and I engaged deeply with community members, city departments, and the applicant to find win-win solutions to concerns. We would like to thank everyone who shared their feedback, worries, and priorities for the Project. We proactively met with Harvard-Westlake School to raise issues and recommendations, such as ways to address shared public use facilities access, increase onsite open space, reduce the scale, improve pedestrian safety, enhance the public realm, activate transportation demand management strategies, limit special events, promote green building and environmental protections, and reduce traffic, noise, and construction impacts.

We are encouraged by the recent modifications for the Project in the Final Environmental Impact Report. Specifically, a reduction of the pool canopy size and removal of the diving board to reduce noise impacts; the elimination of 17 light poles to limit light pollution; a reduction in grading quantity from 250,000 to 197,000 cubic yards; a reduction in parking from 532 to 403 spaces, resulting in less grading and hauling trips; a reduction in seats from 2,500 to 2,005; and the elimination of water landscaping features to create more publicly accessible open space.

The main entitlement request before you is for a Vesting Conditional Use Permit (CUP) under section 12.24 T of the Los Angeles Municipal Code. These are permits that require discretionary approval from the City. These types of permits allow for a use not authorized by-right in a particular zone. If granted, the permit application is approved under a set of conditions. If an owner does not meet the agreed upon conditions, the CUP can be revoked or the City can request a Plan Approval process to modify conditions as needed.

I would like to respectfully propose the following requests for your consideration as the City Planning Commission reviews the Planning Department's analysis for this Project in a forthcoming staff report. These requests are supported by existing City policies such as the General Plan Framework Element, the applicable Community Plan, the LA River Revitalization Master Plan, and Mobility Plan 2035. I hope these can be turned into binding, enforceable conditions in a future Letter of Determination should this Project move forward.

Public Use and Access

- Ensure that the publicly accessible green space portion of the property is usable Monday through Sunday from 7 am to 9 pm.
- Assure that no Harvard-Westlake associated athletic events, practices, or games will take place on Sundays.
- Formalize a clear process to access public use facilities, including the tennis courts, pool, athletic fields, running track, and gymnasium. Create a process that maximizes opportunities for substantial access for individuals, in addition to community based organizations.
- Remove the outer 3 foot fence along Bellaire Avenue and Valley Spring Lane to make the site feel more open and approachable and to provide direct access from the street onto the property via a public pathway and entry point(s).
- Reduce fence heights from the Los Angeles Municipal Code standards to achieve a conforming height of 8 feet for fences, except for fencing around the tennis courts and the east side of Field A.
- Improve and maintain the Zev Yaroslavsky LA River Greenway Trail on the north side of the Los Angeles River from Whitsett Avenue along the western line of the property upon approval from Los Angeles County.
- Not constructing a pedestrian ramp to Coldwater Canyon and the Zev Yaroslavsky Los Angeles River Greenway Trail.
- Require ADA-compliance on all publicly accessible paths, including to the Zev Yaroslavsky Los Angeles River Greenway Trail, to ensure community access and connection.

Sustainability and Open Space

- Replace decomposed granite with a brand new pocket park in the area between the proposed tennis courts, clubhouse, and northern driveway, thereby increasing publicly accessible green space onsite that will be maintained by the applicant.

- Construct carbon-free buildings to the greatest extent possible.
- Require electric-engine shuttles between the site and the Upper School.
- Strongly advise the use of natural grass for athletic fields. If artificial turf is laid down, require that it be free of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) as specified in pending state and local legislation. Additionally, use a temperature reducing coating to reduce urban heat-island effect.
- Upon further changes in state and local regulations for which the artificial turf is no longer compliant, require immediate replacement of existing turf with a suitable alternative and ensure responsible recycling of previous turf.
- Preserve Mexican Fan Palms in the public right of way.
- Preserve onsite mature trees to the greatest extent feasible, and work towards increasing the net total of native trees to achieve increased shade canopy and carbon sequestration than currently exists at the site.
- Install sound-reducing features between the pool and Field B to further reduce any noise impact.

Streetscape Improvements

- Create a controlled pedestrian crossing in consultation with the Department of Public Works and Department of Transportation at the intersection of Whitsett Avenue and Valleyheart Drive. Work with the Bureau of Engineering and Department of Transportation during the the design process for Segment 8 of the LA RiverWay (Whitsett to Lankershim) to ensure compatibility of the controlled crossing with the forthcoming Segment 8 plans and construction documents.
- Create a continuous ADA-accessible public walkway with new wayfinding signage and an added parkway between the southwest corner of Valleyheart Drive North and the entrance of the Zev Yaroslavsky LA River Greenway Trail upon approval from Los Angeles County (if required).
- Work with the Department of Public Works and the Department of Transportation to assess if further improvements are needed to maintain proper drainage and flow-line southward from the southwest corner of the Valley Spring Lane and Whitsett Avenue intersection. Install such improvements if necessary.

Events

- No football games.
- Modify the number of events to the following: reduce the number of onsite events to 20 events, with two special events capped at 2,000 attendees, 6 events capped at 500 attendees, and 12 events capped at 250 attendees.
- The rental, lease, or use of the property other than by Harvard-Westlake, its related organizations, or as identified in the Final EIR is prohibited.
- Filming on the property for commercial, not school-related purposes, shall be prohibited.

Construction Phase

- In addition to the City of Los Angeles' enforceable Good Neighbor Construction Practices, require that the applicant attend neighborhood council meetings to provide timely project updates before and during major construction; conduct daily site cleanings during construction; have a superintendent and signage with contact information onsite during construction; and employ robust dust control strategies.
- Coordinate construction activities with concurrent neighboring projects to ensure minimal disruption in the area.

Engaging with this project has been a long and often difficult journey. Though the previous owners no longer found it feasible to operate the site under existing conditions, many people in the neighborhood feel a palpable emotional connection to the golf and tennis facilities. The proposed changes to the site, while welcomed by some in the neighborhood, will be painful for many residents who have used these private facilities with their families for decades. I sincerely wish the City had the resources to acquire the site and turn it into a true public park when it was originally up for sale a few years ago.

I believe the requests above are responses that will maximize the public benefits of this Project. I am grateful for the good faith collaboration among our constituents, community partners, city departments, Harvard-Westlake School, and all who worked diligently to get us to this pivotal stage in the process. I am committed to making sure that Harvard-Westlake School follows through on being a responsible and responsive owner and developer.

I support the Project if these requests are included as conditions in the CUP, and would respectfully encourage your support.

Sincerely,



Nithya Raman
Councilmember, 4th Council District
City of Los Angeles