

Errors Found in Reports by Familiar Firm

The Signal News, July 2, 2004 by Lila Campuzano

Impact Sciences Inc., the consulting firm that has done environmental studies for the proposed Newhall Ranch and Riverpark developments, was chastised by Los Angeles County's chief planner for errors in two recent reports, including one for a small project in Bouquet Canyon, officials said Thursday.

The letter from James E. Hartl, the county's planning director, focused on errors in a study prepared to divide one parcel into four lots in Bouquet Canyon near Vasquez Canyon Road, and in another study for a race track in the Antelope Valley, said Daryl Koutnik, supervising regional planner for the county.

Koutnik said the problems related to biological studies, not to environmental impact reports.

"The letter was basically to apprise the company that their biological services are not to the standards that we would normally accept for our list of biological consultants," Koutnik said. "We had to notify them that the quality is not to the appropriate standards and they need to be cognizant of that."

The Agoura Hills firm could be taken off the county's list of approved environmental consultants if the problems aren't corrected, Koutnik said, adding that county planners received a prompt reply and assurances that problems would be fixed.

In the case of the Bouquet Canyon subdivision, Impact Sciences correctly identified a species of native plant but mapped it in the wrong location, Koutnik said. Also, "they put in another species that is not likely to occur there," and county biologists could turn up no evidence of it, he said.

The study for the Antelope Valley property was "poorly prepared," including "misspellings of scientific names and misinformation about the likelihood of species to occur" on the property, he said.

Eric Sakowicz, principal and co-founder of Impact Sciences, said the firm is in the process of correcting such problems.

"We take those (criticisms) seriously and we are endeavoring to modify our internal data collection and review procedures to ensure that the problems are solved," Sakowicz said Thursday.

Frank Hovore of Hovore and Associates, another biological consulting firm, said concerns with Impact Sciences' studies go beyond the two cited by the county.

Hovore, co-founder of the Placerita Canyon Nature Center and a longtime Santa Clarita Valley resident, serves on the county's Significant Ecological Areas Technical Advisory Committee (SEATAC), a board of volunteer experts that meets once a month to review consultants' studies for projects that would fall into "areas of higher sensitivities." All of the Santa Clara River that falls within Los Angeles County is so designated.

Impact Sciences' reports have consistently been "very difficult to read, very difficult to interpret," he said. "We often do not find them to be forthcoming, either."

The problems have persisted for more than a decade, Hovore said, adding frustration boiled to the surface at a recent SEATAC meeting.

“The whole point of the CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) process and the whole point of the SEATAC process is not to generate an intellectual tug of war between the county and a consultant or client, but rather to provide information ... in an honest, forthright and open manner,” Hovore said.

Asked to respond to Hovore’s comments, Sakowicz said, “I’m leery with trying to get into some sort of verbal sparring with Frank.

“Frank has an opinion regarding our work. We certainly value his opinion and also take his comments seriously, as we do everybody’s involved in the county process.”

Impact Sciences prepared the draft EIR for Riverpark, a Newhall Land and Farming Co. proposal for the north shore of the Santa Clara River just east of Bouquet Canyon Road within the city of Santa Clarita.

The firm also prepared the EIR for West Creek, a Newhall Land-proposed development in San Francisquito Canyon that county planners recently took off their agenda due to the discovery of a Western spadefoot toad on the property.

And it prepared the EIR for Newhall Land’s Newhall Ranch project, a huge development proposed for the area near the junction of Interstate 5 and state Route 126. Newhall Ranch would straddle the Santa Clara River.

In 2002 Newhall Land paid a fine to the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office for allegedly destroying an endangered plant, the San Fernando Valley spineflower, on the property. Impact Sciences refused to cooperate in an investigation of the incident.

Newhall Land spokeswoman Marlee Lauffer said the firm has confidence in Impact Sciences’ work.

“We’ve used Impact Sciences for several things, I know; we’ve used others in the past, as well,” she said.

She pointed out that the city, not the developer, hires environmental contractors for proposed developments within the city.

Fred Follstad, senior planner for the city, confirmed that Impact Sciences is one of several contractors on the city’s “approved” list.

“In the county the developer picks their own consultant,” Follstad said. “At the city, we send out a (request for proposal) and it goes through the bidding process.”

The city selects the contractor and acts as a middle man, collecting 100 percent of the cost of the study “up front before we let them loose to do the work. We pick who’s doing the study,” he said.

But Hovore said the city’s system allows for no independent review panel such as SEATAC. Yet many of the county’s environmentally sensitive areas fall within the limits of the city of Santa Clarita, he said.

Lauffer said it’s not just the consulting firm that has a say in the environmental review process.

Many agencies — such as CalTrans, the Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others — review and comment on EIRs, she said. So, too, does the public.

But Hovore said the voluminous and technical nature of EIRs often turns away the public.

“The real issue is the size of an EIR or other document, the bulk and volume of it are not an accurate indicator of its quality,” he said. “Burying the public and burying SEATAC in mountains of paper doesn’t impress us.”

“It should not be up to concerned citizens and housewives to have to do CEQA review,” he said.