



Angeles Chapter
3250 Wilshire Blvd. #1106
Los Angeles, CA 90010-1513

January 20, 2021

Hon. Mike Bonin, Councilmember, CD-11
200 N. Spring Street, Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, California 90012
Via e-mail: councilmember.bonin@lacity.org

Alan Como, AICP
City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning
221 North Figueroa Street, Suite 1350
Los Angeles, CA 90012
Via e-mail: alan.como@lacity.org

RE: Oppose: Berggruen Institute Project, ENV-2019-4565-EIR

Dear Councilmember Mike Bonin and Mr. Alan Como:

The Sierra Club Angeles Chapter Wildland Urban Wildfire Committee (Wildfire Committee) was formed in 2019 in response to the increasing frequency and intensity of destructive wildfires occurring in the Wildland-Urban Interface/Intermix (WUI);¹ to oppose out-of-scale projects proposed in very high fire hazard severity zones in Los Angeles and Orange Counties that decision-makers continue to consider in spite of great wildfire risk; and to address the huge costs to residents, wildlife, infrastructure and the environment.

In alignment with the Wildfire Committee's mission,² we strongly oppose the proposed Berggruen Institute Project (Berggruen) located in a very high fire hazard severity zone (VHFHSZ) in the heart of the Santa Monica Mountains. Berggruen proposes building an approximately 200,000 square foot private retreat in the middle of what is currently 447 acres of undeveloped open space, bringing hundreds, sometimes thousands of people into the area who are unfamiliar with this type of sensitive hillside environment. We oppose this massive construction in a VHFHSZ because it would put hundreds of residents and guests in harm's way in the event of a wind-driven wildfire. It would also endanger those who attempt to evacuate

¹WUI is defined as areas adjacent to or of transition between wildlands and human development and its associated infrastructure in which severe wildfire hazards are increasingly likely due to flammable native and non-native wildland vegetation, hazardous weather patterns, and steep topography. These areas have been designated as Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones by Cal Fire.

² The mission of the Wildfire Committee is to address the risks associated with building in the Wildland-Urban Interface/Intermix and influence policies to reduce those dangers while protecting the environment through education, organizing, and policy change.

where hundreds of additional cars would add to an already challenging evacuation process, creating an unacceptable risk to public safety.

The 2019 Getty fire that broke out in the immediate area burned 745 acres, forced more than 10,000 Brentwood and Pacific Palisades residents to evacuate, destroyed 10 homes, and damaged many others while also impacting wildlife species, habitat and degrading air quality.³ This fire should have served as a bright red flag to every city official involved with the decision-making for this project as to just how vulnerable the proposed Institute site really is. The Getty fire burned acres of Berggruen's property along the project's only access roadway, the miles-long, narrow, winding Serpentine Road.



Serpentine Road leading to the Berggruen Building Site

The situation is only growing more dire everyday. In fact, as I sat here drafting this letter, I received a red flag warning of extreme Santa Ana winds and increasing wildfire risk for LA County (see attached). This is a stark reminder of the “new normal” year-round fire season we are experiencing in Southern California with more frequent and more destructive wildfires.

Last year, the state endured the most extreme fire season on record, with over four million acres burned, 10,000 structures damaged or destroyed, and 31 deaths.⁴ In this context, it is irresponsible to allow a large development project to be built in over 400 acres of open space in a fire-prone, residentially-zoned area during a climate crisis when wildfires are dominating the landscape, impacting lives and property, wildlife habitat, and requiring the expenditure of billions of dollars in costs. Elected officials who continue approving these massive projects in fire-prone neighborhoods are effectively giving matches to an arsonist on a hot, windy day.

³<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-28/getty-fire-smoke-ash-los-angeles-bad-air>

⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/dec/30/california-wildfires-north-complex-record>

Experts agree that human-sparked wildfires are more frequent, faster spreading, and more destructive than those caused by nature.⁵

- Wildfires have become more destructive due to climate change, historic fire suppression and development in wildlands."⁶
- When houses are built close to natural vegetation, they pose two problems related to wildfires. First, there will be more wildfires due to human ignitions. Second, wildfires that occur will pose a greater risk to lives and homes, and they will be hard to fight.⁷
- To stem the escalating loss of life and property, the state needs to curb development in high fire-hazard zones.⁸
- To stop the destruction of our communities by wildfire in our rapidly changing environment we must reduce the flammability of existing communities and prevent new ones from being built in very high fire hazard severity zones.⁹
- California's increasingly deadly and destructive wildfires have become so unpredictable that government officials should consider banning new home construction in vulnerable areas.¹⁰
- The best way to prevent wildfire destruction and death is to stop building houses in the path of fire.¹¹

Based on overwhelming research and evidence concluding that people and structures near wildland areas are the primary driver of destructive wildfires, this committee sponsored a resolution, which Sierra Club California adopted last year. The Los Angeles County Democratic Party passed a similar resolution shortly thereafter. Both adopted new policies address the importance of restricting development in fire-prone areas:

- Sierra Club California: "supports policies that prohibit new building in Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones, consistent with established Sierra Club infill policy, to respond to increasing intensity and frequency of devastating wildfires on lives, habitat, property, infrastructure, and the environment." (Adopted: August 22, 2020)
- The Los Angeles County Democratic Party: "calls on our state leaders to reconsider the approval of increased developments in Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones near or in wildland-urban interface areas, and seeks strong regulations and limits on new structures, as these buildings have been found to increase the size and destructive nature of our states worst fires." (Adopted: September 22, 2020)

Public opinion supports the recommendations of scientists and fire experts to restrict building in fire-prone areas. A 2019 Analysis of Quality of Life Index by UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs (see page 5, figure 8) found that 73 percent of those surveyed believe that the construction of new homes should be prohibited in high risk fire areas. Only 20 percent disagreed.¹²

⁵<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/12/human-sparked-wildfires-are-more-destructive-those-caused-nature>

⁶Fanning the Flames: The Reality of Climate Change and Wildfires in California

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFaDz_NyYX8

⁷<https://www.pnas.org/content/115/13/3314>

⁸<https://www.latimes.com/projects/wildfire-california-fuel-breaks-newsom-paradise/>

⁹https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/sce/sierra-club-california/PDFs/GovNewsom_Wildfires_2019.pdf

¹⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/d2f76432db1749d4918e55624a47c654>

¹¹<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-11-29/california-wildfire-housing-ideas>

¹²<https://ucla.app.box.com/s/t8bb9h8lg48fbfp4l1yz1c6rs35tdmf5>

The Berggruen Institute Project exemplifies a cavalier disregard for the growing danger of massive wildfires in areas where they have been so prevalent. The toll on public safety and the environment in addition to the financial costs of fighting these mega fires is no longer tolerable. The City Council should safeguard very high fire hazard severity zones from further development, not facilitate such dangerous conditions. We must listen to the scientists and fire experts who urge governments to prohibit new construction in our fire-prone hillsides. Because the Berggruen Project will increase the risk of wildfires in the Santa Monica Mountains by the sheer increase of staff and visitors while providing no offsetting benefit to the community, we ask the Los Angeles City Planning Department and the City Council deny this project.

Sincerely,



Lynne Plambeck
Chair, Sierra Club Angeles Chapter
Wildland Urban Wildfire Committee

-----Original Message-----

From: Los Angeles County Fire <FIRE@subscriptions.lacounty.gov>

To: Wildland Urban Wildfire Committee

Sent: Mon, Jan 18, 2021 3:01 pm

Subject: EXTREME SANTA ANA WINDS UPGRADED TO RED FLAG WARNING, INCREASING WILDFIRE RISK FOR LA COUNTY

NEWS RELEASE

Public Information Officer: Battalion Chief Roland Sprewell

Contact: (213) 342-7337

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

EXTREME SANTA ANA WINDS UPGRADED TO RED

COUNTY

Los Angeles, CA – The Los Angeles County Fire Department has implemented its augmented staffing plan in response to the National Weather Service’s red flag warning which is in effect from late tonight through Tuesday, January 19, 2021 at 10:00 p.m.; a high wind warning begins early tomorrow morning through Wednesday, January 20, 2021 at 4:00 a.m. Widespread portions of Los Angeles County are affected, including the areas of Santa Clarita, the high country, Los Angeles basin, and the Santa Monica Mountains, extending to the coast and Catalina Island.

In some areas, this strong and dangerous Santa Ana wind event may develop extreme wind gusts between 50 to 70 miles per hour (with isolated, stronger gusts up to 90 miles per hour in the mountains). Warm temperatures and low humidity are expected in canyon, mountain, and valley areas.

This extreme wind event has resulted in an elevated high fire danger, prompting Los Angeles County Fire Chief Daryl L. Osby to order additional staffing and pre-deployment of resources throughout the County.

At this time, we remind residents living in wildfire prone areas to take appropriate precautions:

- See something, say something. Report any sign of smoke or fire immediately to your local fire department by dialing 9-1-1. If you dial 9-1-1 from your cell phone, be sure to know your location.
- Have your *Ready! Set! Go!* Wildfire Action Plan in place. It is critical for residents to be familiar with the *Ready! Set! Go!* program that provides important pre-planning and evacuation information.
- Prepare for Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS). During elevated weather conditions, utility companies may temporarily shut off power in high-risk areas. Please plan for this possibility and consult with your local utility company for more information.

To download the *Ready! Set! Go!* Wildfire Action Plan and view informational how-to videos, visit fire.lacounty.gov/rsq.

###



The Los Angeles County Fire Department Foundation supports lifesaving programs throughout the region. To be a part of our team, learn more, or donate, visit SupportLACountyFire.org.

The mission of the Los Angeles County Fire Department is to protect lives, the environment, and property by providing prompt, skillful, and cost-effective fire protection and life safety services.

[Los Angeles County Fire Department](http://www.lacountyfire.org)