



SIERRA CLUB

SAN DIEGO CHAPTER

Serving the Environment in San Diego and Imperial Counties

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CONTACT: political@sierraclubncg.org

Sierra Club to Escondido Candidates, 'Don't be Bought, Return Developer money'

Calls on Escondido candidates to return large campaign donations from developer of Harvest Hills in an attempt to get money out of politics

Today, Sierra Club San Diego Chapter released letters sent to three candidates in the up-coming Escondido City Council race requesting they return the excessively high campaign donations they received from Safari Highland LLC, proponents of Harvest Hills.

Three candidates in local Escondido city council races, current Councilmember Mike Morasco (Candidate for District 4), Mr. Joe Garcia (candidate for District 3) and, Ms. Tina Inscoe (Candidate for District 2) received formal requests from the Sierra Club to return the \$4,300 donation they each received from Safari Highlands LLC.

At the core of the action is the up-coming Escondido Council vote expected on the controversial "Harvest Hills" (remarketed name of Safari Highlands Ranch), another high-end sprawl development threatening our region. Located just east of the Safari Park in North County, it proposes an up-zone to 550 units on 1,100 acres of open space currently zoned for just 27 units. Harvest Hills will decimate hundreds of acres of critical wildlife habitat, increase wildfire risks by locating numerous homes in a high-risk fire zone - a danger compounded by the lack of safe and adequate routes for numerous area residents - and it will undermine progress on transit and climate change mitigation.

Given the significant negative implications for Escondido and the region for decades to come, Sierra Club believes it is imperative that officials who ultimately decide this project not have a conflict of interest. This project is expected to be voted on in the next few months, perhaps after the November 3rd election. It is important that the public have confidence in the objectivity of its representatives when the project is decided.

Sierra Club holds that receipt of campaign contributions from entities with financial business in front of the City Council is inappropriate and creates a conflict of interest. In addition, it erodes public confidence in the integrity of our democratic processes. **Sierra Club has asked all three candidates to return the donations or commit to recuse themselves from any future Harvest Hills decisions.**

Sierra Club recognizes that, while Safari Highlands LLC is currently legally allowed to make the donation, candidates are within their rights to refuse it.

This action follows a request by Sierra Club North County Group at the Escondido City Council discussion of campaign finance reform on August 12, 2020. Sierra Club NCG has requested that Escondido significantly lower maximum campaign limits and include an ordinance comparable to one in the city of San Marcos (Section 2.16.070) that limits campaign donations from entities with a financial interest within a year of a decision.

Laura Hunter, Chair of the Sierra Club NCG Conservation Committee stated, “We strongly support campaign dollar and time limitations for City Council decisions of a financial nature. The leadership the new Council has taken to pursue revisions to lower campaign donation limits are important. But, in addition, we need decisions to be as ‘clean’ as possible, meaning the public needs to have confidence in them. The public won’t have confidence in our elected officials’ decisions if it appears they have been ‘bought’ with campaign contributions as high as \$4,300 per candidate.”

Sierra Club San Diego Chapter has over 20,000 members and supporters. Sierra Club North County Group (NCG) has over 1,500 members and supporters in Escondido. We work to protect human health and the environment, support good planning, and action to reverse the worst effects of climate change.

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