

Hills For Everyone

Friends of the
Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor



Newsletter No. 48

Spring 2023

Bad Road, Good Outcome!



Melanie Schlotterbeck

A view of Brea Canyon Road, heading toward Tonner Canyon Road and Diamond Bar.

In 2017, Orange County (OC) Public Works notified the public of its intent to expand the rural two lane Brea Canyon Road to four lanes from Central Avenue/ State College in Brea to just past the on-ramp to the southbound 57 Freeway. The County planned to replace three bridges and add k-rail down the middle of the widened road. Currently, that road is fully permeable to wildlife movement and is the route wildlife use to cross under the 57 Freeway into the Puente Hills. In short, widening this road looked to be a corridor killer. The County would also use tax payer money to improve vehicular access to the 3,000-acre Aera Energy property, which would help allow development of land we are hoping to protect.

Hills For Everyone (HFE) asked for wildlife movement studies and got them. The County even offered up a wildlife overpass, but our experts said none of the mitigations would be enough to overcome the impacts of a widened road with faster vehicles and k-rail down the middle. It looked like we might need to engage in a costly, unpredictable lawsuit to save the linkage. What looked to be a pending unmitigated disaster for wildlife movement turned out to be just the opposite. **We killed the road widening project!**

Knowing that this project could sever the Wildlife Corridor, we hired attorneys and experts immediately. If wildlife couldn't safely cross this road to provide new

genes from the Chino Hills to the Puente Hills on the west, wildlife on the west could die out due to inbreeding.

The County released the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) over the holidays in December 2022. We had to fight to get a two-week extension on the comment deadline. We coordinated comments with our partners to cover all topics—hydrology, biology, growth inducing impacts, etc. Strong comments were submitted by all on the DEIR. Even the leading authority on cougar movement in Southern California, Dr. Winston Vickers, submitted comments.

The City of Brea was not thrilled with the expansion and learned the road would cost a whopping \$181 million for 1.5 miles (or \$23,000 a foot). By comparison, Orange County Transportation Authority budgeted \$259 million for a 10-mile long freeway lane widening project in the area (\$4,800 a foot).

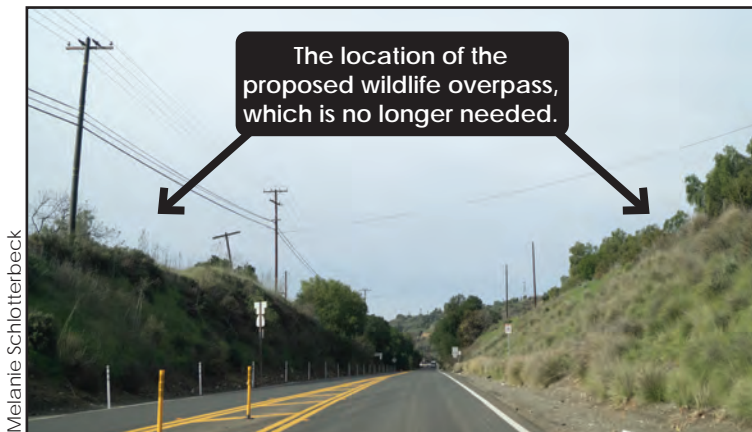
HFE met via Zoom with OC Supervisor Doug Chaffee, in whose district this project lies, providing a short PowerPoint to explain our strong opposition. We pointed out there has been a public and private investment of over \$263 million in protecting 27,000 acres in our hills. This one road project threatens that sizable conservation investment. Supervisor Chaffee has historically supported these conservation efforts. In his own research, he learned

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that the County was the only supporter of the road widening. The Cities of Brea and Diamond Bar, the Habitat Authority, Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority, the County of Los Angeles, and many conservation groups all opposed the project. And, the high price tag was staggering.

We received word that the County is pulling the plug on this project due to the significant opposition and high cost. Now, the County will only look at repairing three bridges. There is more work to be done to be sure this widening is off the Master Plan of Arterial Highways, but this is a huge first step. We are grateful to both Brea and Supervisor Chaffee for this incredible victory.



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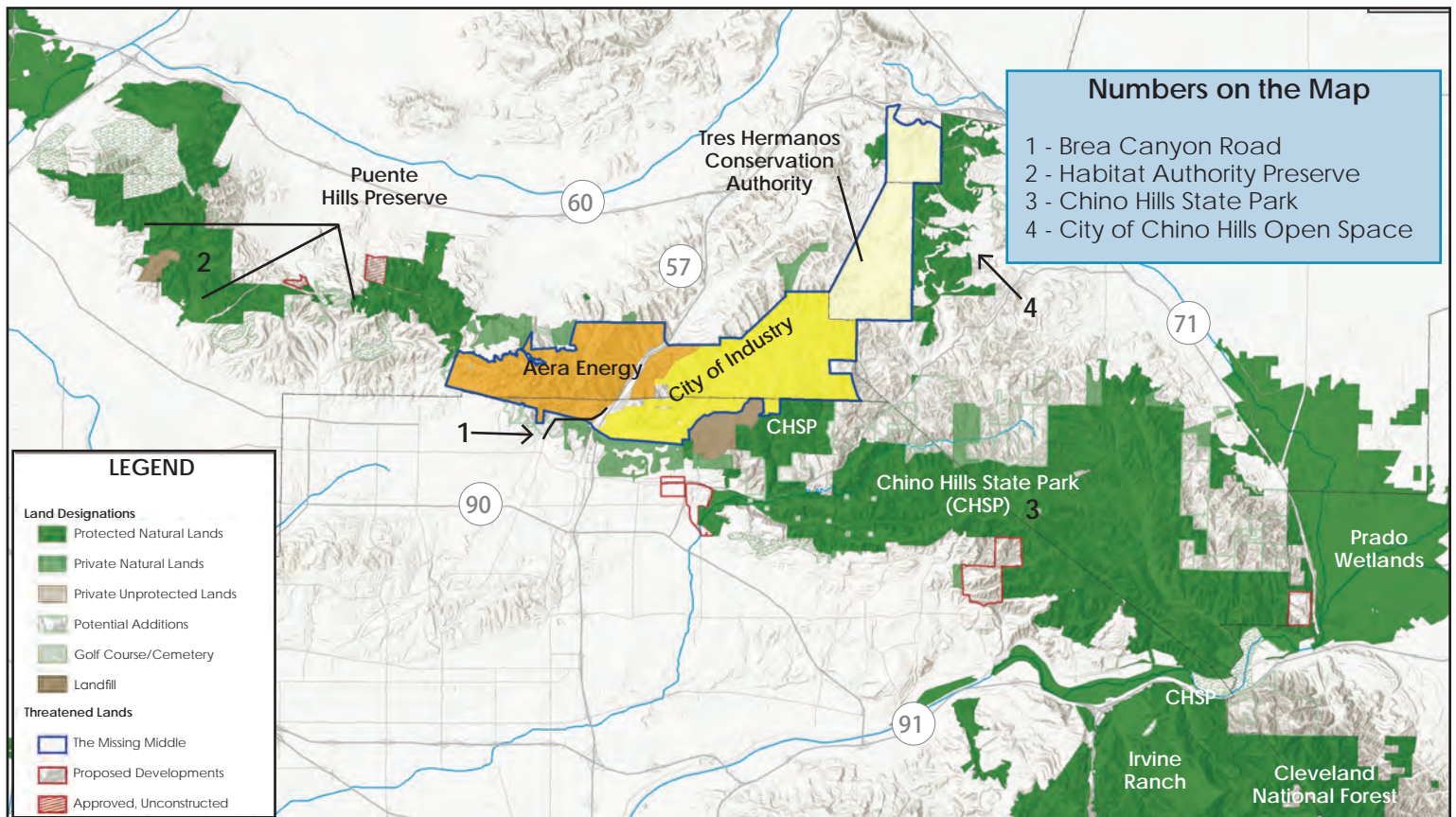
Cougars In Our Hills

Scientists studying the cougar population of the Santa Ana Mountains have confirmed that cougars are indeed crossing back and forth under the 91 Freeway into the Chino Hills and migrating into the Puente Hills. One young dispersing male recently traveled all the way over to Whittier looking for its main food source—deer. While it may be unnerving, the presence of cougars in our hills is a sign of a healthy ecosystem. Cougars tend to avoid human contact, but if you do encounter one in the wildlands, here are a few tips:

- **Stay calm.**
- **Don't run**—you can trigger their chase response.
- Make yourself **appear big** (stand tall and wave your arms).
- **Make noise.**



Mapping the Corridor Projects



Why Trails Close Down When It Rains



Melanie Schlotterbeck



The recent heavy rains in Southern California have left our parks and trails extremely vulnerable, causing many closures which are necessary for several reasons.

First, our hills contain a lot of clay. This not only makes them slower to dry out after a rain, but renders them dangerously slippery. Second, rangers, first responders, and emergency vehicles may not be able to reach injured visitors on closed trails because their vehicles get stuck or slide down the hills. Third, if trails are used before they are ready, they become severely damaged with ruts, leading to erosion of the soil. Fourth, puddles often persist on the trails long after the rains stop. When visitors circumvent these puddles, they inadvertently expand the trail, damaging the habitat on both sides. Finally, any kind of traffic—from feet, hooves, or tires—compacts the wet soil, making the ground less able to absorb future rain, thereby stunting plant growth and increasing runoff.

So, if you head to a local park after the rains and see the trail closure sign, please respect it. This protects you and the land. When the trails in Chino Hills State Park are closed, consider Bane Canyon Road as an alternative where you can safely drive, walk, and ride a bike (photo left). Check each Park's social media posts for daily updates on trail status.

Through The Eyes of a Bobcat

The 27,000 acres that has been protected in our hills are under the management by many different entities. The Habitat Authority manages its ~4,000 acres on the west, while State Parks manages its 14,000 on the east. The City of Chino Hills manages its ~3,000 acres of open space. There are many other small managers too. Each of the entities has different rules about trail closures, hours of operation, and dogs on trails. The State Park has the most stringent limitation on pets. Here's why...

There are many different kinds of units in the State Park system: State Recreation Areas (like Lake Perris), State Historic Parks (like Pio Pico), and State Parks (like Chino Hills). The purpose of a State Park is preservation of its natural resources for current and future generations. If it weren't for the rich diversity of plants and animals, the land we know as Chino Hills State Park would not have been worthy of state protection and the expenditure of taxpayer funds to buy it. So, the safety and well-being of the Park's wildlife is the highest value.

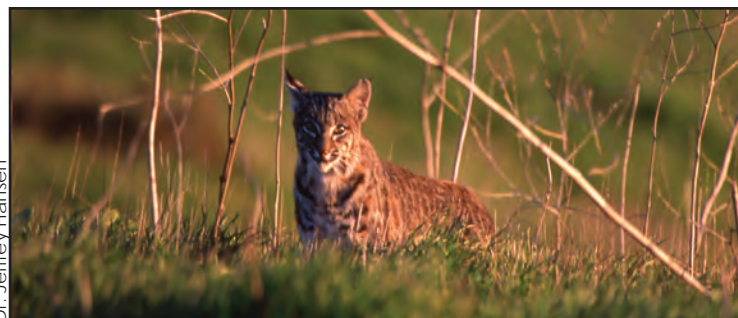
If you take your dog on a dirt trail, even if it is leashed, and even if you pick up its poop, it will still urinate and still leave its scent. A bobcat will interpret that as the



presence of a predator or competitor, and will seek out a new place to roam. Unlike a bobcat or a coyote, a dog doesn't need to hunt for food. So, dogs aren't really competitors, but the bobcats don't know that. Yet, every single day wildlife needs to expend calories to feed itself and its young. If its routes and trails are disrupted with dog scents, it has to expend ever more precious calories. Over time, the bobcat can become malnourished, and vulnerable to predators and disease. Dogs can also disrupt all sorts of bird and small mammal nests that lie hidden on the ground or in the grasses.

Additionally, consider the danger to your dog. Rattlesnakes abound in the park; if your pet is bitten, the risk of permanent injury or death is heightened by the distance to emergency services. We have witnessed a man trying to carry a 60-pound pit bull from Telegraph Overlook to his car, parked at the gated entrance, after it was bitten by a rattlesnake.

Think of each trail through the eyes of a bobcat or a nesting bird. Because without these wildlife, you wouldn't have a trail to hike on.



Dr. Jeffrey Hansen



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HFE Board Member Updates

We are saddened to announce the unexpected passing of long time Board member Dr. Jack Bath. A memorial service was held in late January honoring his generous spirit of volunteerism to many groups and causes. The service can be viewed on our YouTube channel. This is the video link: <https://bit.ly/3YEpxqd>

Jack's sense of humor was legendary and we will miss him immensely. As his family noted and we all experienced, "He was a tireless voice in defense of wildlife habitats and its vulnerable inhabitants."

In the fall, we welcomed Yorba Linda resident, Josh Schroeder, a Southern California native. Josh spent his childhood hiking and camping, and along the way, became an Eagle Scout. He now works as a software engineer for a Fortune 500 company while also fighting bad land use decisions in his hometown. Welcome aboard Josh, and thank you.

HFE Board President, Mike Hughes, was recently honored by the Puente Hills Habitat Preservation Authority at the end of his 24 years of service on its Board. Mike is in the white outfit, second from left.



Get Involved

There are many ways to support HFE's work. In addition to these platforms, you can join our email list. We send out about one email a month and never sell, trade, or share our list. Subscribe on our website:



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