October 26, 2015

Submitted electronically
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RE: Recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report, 8150 Sunset Boulevard Mixed-Use Project

Dear Srimal Hewawitharana:

On behalf of the Los Angeles Conservancy, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Recirculated Portions of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (RP-DEIR) for the 8150 Sunset Boulevard Mixed-Use Project.

The Conservancy, along with our Modern Committee and Hollywood Heritage, has long recognized the Kurt Meyer-designed Lytton Savings and current Chase Bank building as being historic and warranting preservation. We are not opposed to the proposed development of a mixed-use project at this location, but we strongly object to the needless demolition of a historic building that could otherwise be integrated and reused as part of the overall design.

In our ongoing discussions with the project team, the Conservancy has sought to achieve a win-win solution for the site that would preserve Lytton Savings as part of the new development. Up until the current revision of the proposed project, the Conservancy had been working very closely with the project team and were close to achieving agreement on a preservation-based solution. The new alternative – Alternative Nine/Enhanced View Corridor and Additional Underground Parking – represents a substantial step backwards. The proposed demolition of Lytton Savings is unjustified and will result in a significant adverse impact and loss to Los Angeles’ postwar heritage.

I. Alternative Nine fails to address significant adverse impacts to a known cultural resource when feasible alternatives to demolition are provided within the DEIR.
As the proposed project currently stands, there will be a significant and irreversible adverse impact to the historic Lytton Savings building. In our previous comments, the Conservancy has urged the City to mandate consideration of a range of potentially feasible preservation alternatives to demolition, and two (Alternatives Five and Six) were evaluated in the original DEIR.

Like the proposed project, Alternative Nine calls for the removal of all existing buildings on the project site, including Lytton Savings. The RP-DEIR states that the new alternative aims to address community concerns about the proposed project, including obstructed views, impaired visual quality, impacts to air quality, increased traffic, and insufficient parking. Alternative Nine, however, fails to respond to community objections to the demolition of Lytton Savings, a California Register-eligible resource. Not only is this a loss of an identified cultural resource but also fails to meet sustainability goals, instead needlessly throwing away a resource that could otherwise be retained and reused.

A key policy under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is the lead agency’s duty to “take all action necessary to provide the people of this state with historic environmental qualities and preserve for future generations examples of major periods of California history.” To this end, CEQA requires public agencies to deny approval of a project with significant adverse effects when feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures can substantially lessen such effects.

Courts often refer to the EIR as “the heart” of CEQA because it provides decision makers with an in-depth review of projects with potentially significant environmental impacts and analyzes a range of alternatives that reduce those impacts. Based on objective analyses found in the EIR, agencies “shall mitigate or avoid the significant effects on the environment whenever it is feasible to do so.” The lead agency cannot merely adopt a statement of overriding considerations and approve a project with significant impacts; it must first adopt feasible alternatives and mitigation measures.

The RP-DEIR recognizes Alternative Six/Reduced Height and Bank Preservation Alternative as the environmentally superior alternative because it would reduce the majority of project-related impacts and eliminate the significant adverse impact to cultural resources by retaining and reusing Lytton Savings. This alternative would also meet all of the project objectives. Further, the existing building provides a very similar footprint and overall square footage to the proposed replacement building. The question is why is this project proposing to demolish a building with a new building of similar size when it otherwise could be retained and reused?

Despite meeting the project objectives, the RP-DEIR attempts to undermine the environmental benefits of Alternative Six by asserting that Alternative Nine would be more economically viable because it provides

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1 Public Resource Code, Sec. 21001 (b), (c).
2 Sierra Club v. Gilroy City Council (1990) 222 Cal.App.3d 30, 41; also see PRC Secs. 21002, 21002.1.
4 Public Resource Code, Sec. 21002.1.
more commercial/retail space. This conclusion, however, is inconsistent with an earlier description of Alternative Nine, which indicates that the total area of commercial uses under this Alternative is similar to what is proposed under Alternatives Five and Six. According to the analysis, Alternative Six would consist of 291 residential units and 62,231 square feet of commercial uses, compared with Alternative Nine’s proposal for 249 residential units and 65,000 square feet of commercial uses. While there would be a slight reduction in commercial floor area under Alternative Six, there would also be an increase in residential square footage and the number of overall units. In other words, Alternative Six provides a fourteen percent (14%) increase in the number of residential units and only a four percent (4%) decrease in commercial square footage. Therefore, statements in the RP-DEIR appear to exaggerate the facts and are inaccurate in an attempt to make a case for Alternative Nine.

No substantive evidence or analysis is provided to demonstrate infeasibility or compelling reasons for why Alternatives Five and Six are not viable. Though both meet all of the outlined project objectives, and CEQA does not require an alternative to meet all of the objectives or provide a certain rate of economic return in order for it to be viable, especially if it reduces environmental impacts. CEQA guidelines are clear on this point and specifically state:

“The discussion of alternatives shall focus on alternatives to the project or its location which are capable of avoiding or substantially lessening any significant effects of the project, even if these alternatives would impede to some degree the attainment of project objectives, or would be more costly.”

While we raised questions in our comments on the DEIR regarding certain elements of Alternatives Five and Six, including proposed modifications to Lytton Savings as part of its reuse, we strongly believe that both alternatives allow for an economically viable project to proceed at the site. Both outline a path for preservation in conformance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and revitalize the historic building as part of a cohesive new development.

II. The Final EIR should identify Lytton Savings as eligible for both local and California Register designation

As previously stated in our comments on the Notice of Preparation (NOP) and the original DEIR, the Conservancy strongly considers Lytton Savings to be significant both locally and on the regional level as an example that is illustrative of American bank design and architecture during the postwar era. Though the RP-DEIR does not contain an updated analysis of cultural resources, we reiterate our position that the current evaluation of the building’s eligibility is flawed.

Savings and loans were in high demand in the postwar years as they financed the massive residential development boom. Their growth, along with the growth of the region, translated to the need for

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7 Ibid, 2-1.
8 CEQA Guideline 15126.6(b)
increased office space. As such, Lytton Savings is one of Los Angeles’ earliest remaining examples of this transformative shift in postwar-era bank design. Postwar prosperity changed the banking industry forever, as “the middle class and its spending power were finally recognized.”

We believe the Lytton Savings bank building played a significant role in this development and is eligible for local designation, as well as listing on the California Register of Historical Resources. It appears to meet both criteria 1 and 3 for its association with postwar changes in bank architecture and the industry transformation, and its innovative use of materials, integrated art program, and high level of craftsmanship. Ultimately, the DEIR and RP-DEIR fail to justify why Lytton Savings is not California Register-eligible. As we previously pointed out, the analysis contains inconsistencies in its evaluation of the significance of the bank in the development of the savings and loan industry, which leads to a flawed assessment of its eligibility for the California Register.

Furthermore, many of the primary character-defining features of the Lytton Savings bank building are intact. While there were subsequent changes to the overall site and the adjacent Lytton Center, the Conservancy disagrees with the findings that the integrity of the building is so compromised to only warrant its eligibility at the local level. We strongly recommend the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) reevaluate this aspect to assess Lytton Savings’ eligibility for the California Register.

III. Conclusion

The Conservancy strongly urges the City of Los Angeles and the applicant to identify and select one of the preservation alternatives as the preferred project in order to avoid a significant environmental impact and the unwarranted and needless demolition of a cultural resource. This would not only allow for the environmentally superior alternative to proceed, but it would also meet all of the project objectives and provide an opportunity for a dynamic and vibrant urban project with a mix of building heights and styles, of both historic and compatible new construction.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the RP-DEIR for the 8150 Sunset Boulevard Mixed-Use Project. Please feel free to contact me at (213) 430-4203 or afine@laconservancy.org should you have any questions.

About the Conservancy

The Los Angeles Conservancy is the largest local historic preservation organization in the United States, established in 1978 to preserve and revitalize the significant architectural and cultural heritage of Los Angeles through advocacy and education. The Conservancy’s all-volunteer Modern Committee has been at the forefront of preserving mid-century architecture since its inception in 1984.

Sincerely,

Adrian Scott Fine

Adrian Scott Fine
Director of Advocacy

cc: City Councilmember David Ryu, Council District 4
    Hollywood Heritage
    Hollywood Hills West Neighborhood Council