



August 7, 2014

**Submitted by email**

City of West Hollywood

Attention Honorable Mayor and Members of City Council

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**RE: Final Environmental Impact Report, the Melrose Triangle Project  
(Jones Dog & Cat Hospital Building, 9080 Santa Monica  
Boulevard)**

Dear Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council:

On behalf of the Los Angeles Conservancy, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the Melrose Triangle Project. The Conservancy has been closely following this issue and previously commented on the Notice of Preparation (NOP) on March 12, 2002. We submit the following comments to be included as part of the official record with the city and the City Council's upcoming meeting where this project will be addressed.

The Conservancy is not opposed to the proposed development of a mixed-use, gateway project at this location, but not at the needless expense of a historic building that could otherwise be integrated and reused as part of the overall design. The proposed demolition of the Wurdeman and Becket-designed Jones Dog & Cat Hospital is unjustified and will result in a significant adverse impact and loss to the heritage of the city of West Hollywood.

As of July 9, representations for the property owner have agreed to work with the preservation community and evaluate options that would incorporate the building. The Conservancy is hopeful that a revised plan will come forward soon, prior to the City Council meeting on August 18, and one that provides for meaningful preservation and an approach that maintains the eligibility of the existing building as an historic resource. Until a resolution can be successfully reached, the Conservancy remains to have strong concerns regarding the CEQA process and the EIR for this project.



### **A. The Jones Dog & Cat Hospital Building is a significant historic resource**

The former Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building at 9080 Santa Monica Boulevard was built in 1938 is a notable and rare surviving example of a Streamline Moderne commercial building in the City of West Hollywood and was designed by the prominent architecture firm of Wurdeman and Becket. The building is an intact, early example of the work of Wurdeman and Becket, and may be the only remaining, intact example of the work of master architects Wurdeman & Becket in the city. Two other examples of the work of Wurdeman & Becket include the former Mobil Oil/General Petroleum Building, now Pegasus Apartments, and Bullock's Pasadena, now Macy's. Welton Becket as Welton Becket & Associates went on to design many of L.A.'s iconic landmarks, including Capitol Records Tower, the Music Center of Los Angeles County, and the Cinerama Dome.

Dr. Eugene C. Jones, a progressive veterinarian whose clients included the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Gloria Swanson and Rudolph Valentino, commissioned Wurdeman and Becket to expand and remodel his original 1928 animal hospital, transforming it into a sleek and modern facility. Dr. Jones' animal hospital, which specialized in dogs and cats, was considered one of the first in Southern California. Its location at the western edge of West Hollywood near the border with Beverly Hills put it within short distance of the homes of wealthy clientele and their pets. The building operated as an animal hospital for several decades. Between 1951 and 1981, the building was owned and operated by R. Nichol Smith, D.V.M. as a dog hospital.

The January 2008 draft EIR prepared for an earlier version of the Melrose Triangle Project and found that "the building appears to be eligible under Criterion 3 as a fine example of Streamline Moderne architecture" and noted that it "is in good condition and retains its integrity."<sup>1</sup> The more recent 2013 draft EIR further identifies the building as a commission by Wurdeman and Becket, a significant discovery that has been fully substantiated through the archives of the Getty Research Institute. Within West Hollywood's borders, there are exceedingly few examples of the Streamline Moderne style, making the Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building at 9080 Santa Monica Boulevard a particularly rare resource type for the city.

### **B. The Final Environmental Impact Report identifies a preservation alternative as the environmentally superior alternative, as it meets all of the project objectives, retains and reuses the historic building, and reduces overall impacts.**

The Melrose Triangle Project, a mixed-use project proposed for the block bordered by Melrose Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood, calls for the demolition of the Jones Dog & Cat

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<sup>1</sup> Melrose Triangle draft EIR, Jan. 2008: 4.4-5.



Hospital. The EIR includes a preservation alternative, though there are not many details or specifics provided. We understand it would retain the Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building while maintaining the same number of housing units as the proposed project and lessening traffic impacts along Santa Monica Boulevard. The EIR identifies Alternative 3 as the environmentally superior alternative and concludes that it would meet a majority of the project objectives.

It is undisputed that the proposed project, including demolition of an identified historical resource, would cause significant and irreversible adverse impacts to cultural resources. Accordingly, the EIR must evaluate at least one potentially feasible alternative that incorporates the historic Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building into the project and retains its eligibility as a historical resource. The EIR should consider a range of options that reuse the historic building for uses consistent with the project description, combined with infill construction elsewhere on the site to provide the desired aggregate of square footage. Potential alternatives in the EIR could have included a redesign of the proposed “Gateway building,” such as a distinctive flatiron design that responds to the site’s triangular western portion and orientation facing eastbound traffic along Santa Monica Boulevard.

The Conservancy does not believe there has been a good faith effort to assess a true preservation alternative and instead this has largely been stated in name only within the EIR. Despite any substantive details, the EIR concludes that the preservation alternative would meet a majority of the project objectives. While more information needs to be provided to detail what the preservation alternative actually entails, we believe this is a good starting place to further explore how the preservation of the historic building can be accomplished. The City, however, has not addressed this inherent flaw to date with the EIR and we understand has opted to recommend certification of the project as proposed.

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

The Conservancy believes the EIR for the Melrose Triangle Project is inadequate and flawed in the following areas:

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<sup>2</sup> Public Resource Code, Sec. 21001 (b), (c).

<sup>3</sup> *Sierra Club v. Gilroy City Council* (1990) 222 Cal.App.3d 30, 41, italics added; also see PRC Secs. 21002, 21002.1.

<sup>4</sup> *County of Inyo v. Yorty* (1973) 32 Cal.App.3d 795; *Laurel Heights Improvement Association v. Regents of the University of California* (1993) 6 Cal.4<sup>th</sup> 1112, 1123.



**No bona fide preservation alternative is provided.** There does not appear to be a good faith attempt to look at options that retain, incorporate, or adaptively reuse the Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building. A preservation alternative was included in the EIR, however, unlike the proposed project, there are no drawings or schematics provided for the preservation alternative, only some raw numbers about square footage. Details are so vague that it is not even clear how the historic building would be used or tied into the proposed project. Even with the lack of substantive information, the EIR concludes that preservation alternative provided within the EIR is the environmentally superior alternative.

An EIR must include sufficient information about each alternative to allow meaningful evaluation, analysis, and comparison with the proposed project, to foster informed decision-making and public participation. An EIR must be supported by substantial evidence that shows there was an actual consideration of alternatives and mitigation measures, and the process by which decisions were made. The City of West Hollywood, as the lead agency in the preparation of this EIR, has an independent duty under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to fully identify and evaluate alternatives. The Conservancy believes there a need to fully develop the preservation alternative, and provide details and drawings to demonstrate how the historic buildings could be retained as part of the project.

**No substantive evidence is provided that demonstrates infeasibility or compelling reasons why the preservation alternative -- the environmentally superior alternative -- is not viable or being selected.** The EIR clearly states the preservation alternative "would achieve many" and "meets a majority" of the project objectives yet states it "would not result in a cohesive site design" or "may not maximize the redevelopment potential." Again, no analysis, facts or figures are provided to back up these subjective statements. However, in comparison to the proposed project, and looking at the limited information provided within the EIR, the preservation alternative calls for a slight reduction in the square footage of retail/restaurant and office uses, but exactly the same number of units and square footage of residential.

CEQA does not require an alternative to meet all of the project objectives in order for it to be viable, especially if it reduces environmental impacts. Further, the preservation alternative eliminates the impact to a known historic resource and reduces another negative impact on traffic generated by the project.

**The City cannot merely adopt a statement of overriding considerations and approve a project with significant environmental impacts.** Instead the City must first adopt feasible alternatives and mitigation measures. CEQA does not authorize a lead agency to proceed with a project that will have significant, unmitigated effects on the environment, based simply on weighing those effects against the project's perceived benefits.

**No meaningful mitigation measures provided.** The EIR only proposes to document the Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building prior to its demolition. While the demolition of a significant historic resource



cannot be mitigated to a less than significant effect, no other measures are suggested or offered in the EIR.

### **C. Conclusion**

We urge the City Council to uphold its historic preservation goals outlined in the recently-updated General Plan by incorporating the historic Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building into the Melrose Triangle Project. It provides an opportunity to create a dynamic and vibrant urban project with a mix of building heights and styles, of both historic and new construction. Typical of older commercial buildings, the building at 9080 Santa Monica Boulevard extends directly to the sidewalk at the lot line -- a quality which promotes lively street life by placing business storefronts directly adjacent to pedestrian traffic. The new infill construction proposed for the Melrose Triangle Project should also provide street frontage adjacent to the Santa Monica Boulevard sidewalk which will complement the existing character of the historic Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the EIR for the Melrose Triangle Project. The Conservancy welcomes the opportunity to meet and work with the City Council and others to identify a true preservation alternative that allows for the proposed project to advance along with the preservation and reuse of the historic Jones Dog & Cat Hospital building. Please feel free to contact me at (213) 430-4203 or [afine@laconservancy.org](mailto:afine@laconservancy.org) should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Adrian Scott Fine  
Director of Advocacy

