

P: (626) 314-3821
F: (626) 389-5414
E: info@mitschsailaw.com



Mitchell M. Tsai
Law Firm

139 South Hudson Avenue
Suite 200
Pasadena, California 91101

VIA E-MAIL

October 30, 2024

County Planning Commission
Engineering Building, Room 17
123 East Anapamu Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Ph:(805) 568-2000 (Planning & Development)
Em: dvillalo@countyofsb.org

RE: County of Santa Barbara's Rosewood Miramar Project (Agenda Item No. V.1.)

Dear Commissioners,

On behalf of the **Western States Regional Council of Carpenters** (“**Western Carpenters**” or “**WSRCC**”), my Office is submitting these comments for the County of Santa Barbara’s (“**County**”) County Planning Commission Hearing, for the Rosewood Miramar (“**Project**”).

The Western Carpenters is a labor union representing almost 90,000 union carpenters in 12 states, including California, and has a strong interest in well-ordered land use planning and in addressing the environmental impacts of development projects.

The Staff Report describes the Project as the following:

The proposed residential and commercial development will be located in the existing northwest and northeast parking lots on site. Development in the northwest parking lot will consist of two new mixed-use buildings, Building A and Building B. Building A will be 16,597 square feet, with 8,573 square feet of residential square footage and 8,024 square feet of commercial square footage. Building A will have a maximum height of 33'-5". Building B will be 20,786 square feet, with 11,310 square feet of residential square footage and 9,476 square feet of commercial square footage. Building B will have a maximum height of 30'-2". There will be eight market-rate apartments (four on the second-floor of each building) comprised of one one-bedroom unit, four two-bedroom units, and three three-bedroom units. The first floor of the buildings will be

commercial space including 15,000 square feet of resort shops and a 2,500-square-foot café. There will be up to 12 resort shops that will be resort/visitor-serving light commercial uses similar in nature to the existing resort shops on site, such as resort-oriented clothing shops, jewelry stores, and wellness/beauty shops. There will also be a subterranean parking lot with 79 parking spaces. (Staff Report, p. 10.)

Individual members of WSRCC live, work, and recreate in the County and surrounding communities and would be directly affected by the Project’s environmental impacts.

The Western States Regional Council of Carpenters expressly reserves the right to supplement these comments at or prior to hearings on the Project, and at any later hearing and proceeding related to this Project. Gov. Code, § 65009, subd. (b); Pub. Res. Code, § 21177, subd. (a); see *Bakersfield Citizens for Local Control v. Bakersfield* (2004) 124 Cal.App.4th 1184, 1199-1203; see also *Galante Vineyards v. Monterey Water Dist.* (1997) 60 Cal.App.4th 1109, 1121.

The Western Carpenters incorporates by reference all comments raising issues regarding the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) submitted prior to certification of the EIR for the Project. See *Citizens for Clean Energy v City of Woodland* (2014) 225 Cal.App.4th 173, 191 (finding that any party who has objected to the project’s environmental documentation may assert any issue timely raised by other parties).

Moreover, the Western Carpenters requests that the County provide notice for any and all notices referring or related to the Project issued under the California Environmental Quality Act (**CEQA**) (Pub. Res. Code, § 21000 *et seq.*), and the California Planning and Zoning Law (“**Planning and Zoning Law**”) (Gov. Code, §§ 65000–65010). California Public Resources Code Sections 21092.2, and 21167(f) and California Government Code Section 65092 require agencies to mail such notices to any person who has filed a written request for them with the clerk of the agency’s governing body.

I. THE COUNTY SHOULD REQUIRE THE USE OF A LOCAL WORKFORCE TO BENEFIT THE COMMUNITY’S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

The County should require the Project to be built using a local workers who have graduated from a Joint Labor-Management Apprenticeship Program approved by the State of California, have at least as many hours of on-the-job experience in the

applicable craft which would be required to graduate from such a state-approved apprenticeship training program, or who are registered apprentices in a state-approved apprenticeship training program.

Community benefits such as local hire can also be helpful to reduce environmental impacts and improve the positive economic impact of the Project. Local hire provisions requiring that a certain percentage of workers reside within 10 miles or less of the Project site can reduce the length of vendor trips, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and provide localized economic benefits. As environmental consultants Matt Hagemann and Paul E. Rosenfeld note:

[A]ny local hire requirement that results in a decreased worker trip length from the default value has the potential to result in a reduction of construction-related GHG emissions, though the significance of the reduction would vary based on the location and urbanization level of the project site.

March 8, 2021 SWAPE Letter to Mitchell M. Tsai re Local Hire Requirements and Considerations for Greenhouse Gas Modeling.

Workforce requirements promote the development of skilled trades that yield sustainable economic development. As the California Workforce Development Board and the University of California, Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education concluded:

[L]abor should be considered an investment rather than a cost—and investments in growing, diversifying, and upskilling California’s workforce can positively affect returns on climate mitigation efforts. In other words, well-trained workers are key to delivering emissions reductions and moving California closer to its climate targets.¹

Furthermore, workforce policies have significant environmental benefits given that they improve an area’s jobs-housing balance, decreasing the amount and length of job commutes and the associated greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In fact, on May 7,

¹ California Workforce Development Board (2020) Putting California on the High Road: A Jobs and Climate Action Plan for 2030 at p. ii, available at <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Putting-California-on-the-High-Road.pdf>.

2021, the South Coast Air Quality Management District found that that the “[u]se of a local state-certified apprenticeship program” can result in air pollutant reductions.²

Locating jobs closer to residential areas can have significant environmental benefits. As the California Planning Roundtable noted in 2008:

People who live and work in the same jurisdiction would be more likely to take transit, walk, or bicycle to work than residents of less balanced communities and their vehicle trips would be shorter. Benefits would include potential reductions in both vehicle miles traveled and vehicle hours traveled.³

Moreover, local hire mandates and skill-training are critical facets of a strategy to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT). As planning experts Robert Cervero and Michael Duncan have noted, simply placing jobs near housing stock is insufficient to achieve VMT reductions given that the skill requirements of available local jobs must match those held by local residents.⁴ Some municipalities have even tied local hire and other workforce policies to local development permits to address transportation issues. Cervero and Duncan note that:

In nearly built-out Berkeley, CA, the approach to balancing jobs and housing is to create local jobs rather than to develop new housing. The city’s First Source program encourages businesses to hire local residents, especially for entry- and intermediate-level jobs, and sponsors vocational training to ensure residents are employment-ready. While the program is voluntary, some 300 businesses have used it to date, placing more than 3,000 city residents in local jobs since it was launched in 1986. When needed, these carrots are matched by sticks, since the city is not shy about

² South Coast Air Quality Management District (May 7, 2021) Certify Final Environmental Assessment and Adopt Proposed Rule 2305 – Warehouse Indirect Source Rule – Warehouse Actions and Investments to Reduce Emissions Program, and Proposed Rule 316 – Fees for Rule 2305, Submit Rule 2305 for Inclusion Into the SIP, and Approve Supporting Budget Actions, *available at* <http://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/Agendas/Governing-Board/2021/2021-May7-027.pdf?sfvrsn=10>.

³ California Planning Roundtable (2008) Deconstructing Jobs-Housing Balance at p. 6, *available at* <https://cprroundtable.org/static/media/uploads/publications/cpr-jobs-housing.pdf>

⁴ Cervero, Robert and Duncan, Michael (2006) Which Reduces Vehicle Travel More: Jobs-Housing Balance or Retail-Housing Mixing? *Journal of the American Planning Association* 72 (4), 475-490, 482, *available at* <http://reconnectingamerica.org/assets/Uploads/UTCT-825.pdf>.

negotiating corporate participation in First Source as a condition of approval for development permits.

Recently, the State of California verified its commitment towards workforce development through the Affordable Housing and High Road Jobs Act of 2022, otherwise known as Assembly Bill No. 2011 (“**AB2011**”). AB2011 amended the Planning and Zoning Law to allow ministerial, by-right approval for projects being built alongside commercial corridors that meet affordability and labor requirements.

The County should consider utilizing local workforce policies and requirements to benefit the local area economically and to mitigate greenhouse gas, improve air quality, and reduce transportation impacts.

II. THE CITY SHOULD IMPOSE TRAINING REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PROJECT’S CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES TO PREVENT COMMUNITY SPREAD OF COVID-19 AND OTHER INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Construction work has been defined as a Lower to High-risk activity for COVID-19 spread by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Recently, several construction sites have been identified as sources of community spread of COVID-19.⁵

Western Carpenters recommend that the Lead Agency adopt additional requirements to mitigate public health risks from the Project’s construction activities. WSRCC requests that the Lead Agency require safe on-site construction work practices as well as training and certification for any construction workers on the Project Site.

In particular, based upon Western Carpenters’ experience with safe construction site work practices, WSRCC recommends that the Lead Agency require that while construction activities are being conducted at the Project Site:

Construction Site Design:

- The Project Site will be limited to two controlled entry points.

⁵ Santa Clara County Public Health (June 12, 2020) COVID-19 CASES AT CONSTRUCTION SITES HIGHLIGHT NEED FOR CONTINUED VIGILANCE IN SECTORS THAT HAVE REOPENED, available at <https://www.sccgov.org/sites/covid19/Pages/press-release-06-12-2020-cases-at-construction-sites.aspx>.

- Entry points will have temperature screening technicians taking temperature readings when the entry point is open.
- The Temperature Screening Site Plan shows details regarding access to the Project Site and Project Site logistics for conducting temperature screening.
- A 48-hour advance notice will be provided to all trades prior to the first day of temperature screening.
- The perimeter fence directly adjacent to the entry points will be clearly marked indicating the appropriate 6-foot social distancing position for when you approach the screening area. Please reference the Apex temperature screening site map for additional details.
- There will be clear signage posted at the project site directing you through temperature screening.
- Provide hand washing stations throughout the construction site.

Testing Procedures:

- The temperature screening being used are non-contact devices.
- Temperature readings will not be recorded.
- Personnel will be screened upon entering the testing center and should only take 1-2 seconds per individual.
- Hard hats, head coverings, sweat, dirt, sunscreen or any other cosmetics must be removed on the forehead before temperature screening.
- Anyone who refuses to submit to a temperature screening or does not answer the health screening questions will be refused access to the Project Site.
- Screening will be performed at both entrances from 5:30 am to 7:30 am.; main gate [ZONE 1] and personnel gate [ZONE 2]

- After 7:30 am only the main gate entrance [ZONE 1] will continue to be used for temperature testing for anybody gaining entry to the project site such as returning personnel, deliveries, and visitors.
- If the digital thermometer displays a temperature reading above 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, a second reading will be taken to verify an accurate reading.
- If the second reading confirms an elevated temperature, DHS will instruct the individual that he/she will not be allowed to enter the Project Site. DHS will also instruct the individual to promptly notify his/her supervisor and his/her human resources (HR) representative and provide them with a copy of Annex A.

Planning

- Require the development of an Infectious Disease Preparedness and Response Plan that will include basic infection prevention measures (requiring the use of personal protection equipment), policies and procedures for prompt identification and isolation of sick individuals, social distancing (prohibiting gatherings of no more than 10 people including all-hands meetings and all-hands lunches) communication and training and workplace controls that meet standards that may be promulgated by the Center for Disease Control, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Cal/OSHA, California Department of Public Health or applicable local public health agencies.⁶

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Carpenters International Training Fund has developed COVID-19 Training and Certification to ensure that Carpenter union

⁶ See also The Center for Construction Research and Training, North America's Building Trades Unions (April 27 2020) NABTU and CPWR COVID-19 Standards for U.S. Construction Sites, available at https://www.cpwr.com/sites/default/files/NABTU_CPWR_Standards_COVID-19.pdf; Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (2020) Guidelines for Construction Sites During COVID-19 Pandemic, available at https://dpw.lacounty.gov/building-and-safety/docs/pw_guidelines-construction-sites.pdf.

members and apprentices conduct safe work practices. The Agency should require that all construction workers undergo COVID-19 Training and Certification before being allowed to conduct construction activities at the Project Site.

Western Carpenters has also developed a rigorous Infection Control Risk Assessment (“**ICRA**”) training program to ensure it delivers a workforce that understands how to identify and control infection risks by implementing protocols to protect themselves and all others during renovation and construction projects in healthcare environments.⁷

ICRA protocols are intended to contain pathogens, control airflow, and protect patients during the construction, maintenance and renovation of healthcare facilities. ICRA protocols prevent cross contamination, minimizing the risk of secondary infections in patients at hospital facilities.

The City should require the Project to be built using a workforce trained in ICRA protocols.

III. **THE PROJECT WOULD BE APPROVED IN VIOLATION OF THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT**

A. Background Concerning the California Environmental Quality Act

The California Environmental Quality Act is a California statute designed to inform decision-makers and the public about the potential significant environmental effects of a project. 14 California Code of Regulations (“**CEQA Guidelines**”), § 15002, subd. (a)(1).⁸ At its core, its purpose is to “inform the public and its responsible officials of the environmental consequences of their decisions *before* they are made.” *Citizens of Goleta Valley v. Board of Supervisors* (1990) 52 Cal.3d 553, 564.

1. *Background Concerning Environmental Impact Reports*

CEQA directs public agencies to avoid or reduce environmental damage, when possible, by requiring alternatives or mitigation measures. CEQA Guidelines, § 15002,

⁷ For details concerning Western Carpenters’s ICRA training program, *see*

<https://www.swmsctf.org/courses/icra-best-practices-in-health-care-construction/>

⁸ The CEQA Guidelines, codified in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, section 15000 et seq., are regulatory guidelines promulgated by the state Natural Resources Agency for the implementation of CEQA. Cal. Pub. Res. Code, § 21083. The CEQA Guidelines are given “great weight in interpreting CEQA except when . . . clearly unauthorized or erroneous.” *Center for Biological Diversity v. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife* (2015) 62 Cal.4th 204, 217.

subds. (a)(2)-(3); see also *Berkeley Keep Jets Over the Bay Committee v. Board of Port Comes* (2001) 91 Cal.App.4th 1344, 1354; *Citizens of Goleta Valley v. Board of Supervisors* (1990) 52 Cal.3d 553; *Laurel Heights Improvement Assn.*, 47 Cal.3d at p. 400. The EIR serves to provide public agencies and the public in general with information about the effect that a proposed project is likely to have on the environment and to “identify ways that environmental damage can be avoided or significantly reduced.” CEQA Guidelines, § 15002, subd. (a)(2). If the project has a significant effect on the environment, the agency may approve the project only upon finding that it has “eliminated or substantially lessened all significant effects on the environment where feasible” and that any unavoidable significant effects on the environment are “acceptable due to overriding concerns” specified in Public Resources Code section 21081. See CEQA Guidelines, § 15092, subds. (b)(2)(A)-(B).

While the courts review an EIR using an ‘abuse of discretion’ standard, the reviewing court is not to *uncritically* rely on every study or analysis presented by a project proponent in support of its position. *Berkeley Jets*, 91 Cal.App.4th at p. 1355 (quoting *Laurel Heights Improvement Assn.*, 47 Cal.3d at pp. 391, 409 fn. 12) (internal quotations omitted). A clearly inadequate or unsupported study is entitled to no judicial deference. *Id.* Drawing this line and determining whether the EIR complies with CEQA’s information disclosure requirements presents a question of law subject to independent review by the courts. *Sierra Club v. County of Fresno* (2018) 6 Cal.5th 502, 515; *Madera Oversight Coalition, Inc. v. County of Madera* (2011) 199 Cal.App.4th 48, 102, 131. As the court stated in *Berkeley Jets*, prejudicial abuse of discretion occurs if the failure to include relevant information precludes informed decision-making and informed public participation, thereby thwarting the statutory goals of the EIR process. 91 Cal.App.4th at p. 1355 (internal quotations omitted).

The preparation and circulation of an EIR is more than a set of technical hurdles for agencies and developers to overcome. *Communities for a Better Environment v. Richmond* (2010) 184 Cal.App.4th 70, 80 (quoting *Vineyard Area Citizens for Responsible Growth, Inc. v. City of Rancho Cordova* (2007) 40 Cal.4th 412, 449-450). The EIR’s function is to ensure that government officials who decide to build or approve a project do so with a full understanding of the environmental consequences and, equally important, that the public is assured those consequences have been considered. *Id.* For the EIR to serve these goals it must present information so that the foreseeable impacts of pursuing the project can be understood and weighed, and the public must be given an

adequate opportunity to comment on that presentation before the decision to go forward is made. *Id.*

A strong presumption in favor of requiring preparation of an EIR is built into CEQA. This presumption is reflected in what is known as the “fair argument” standard under which an EIR must be prepared whenever substantial evidence in the record supports a fair argument that a project may have a significant effect on the environment. *Quail Botanical Gardens Found., Inc. v. City of Encinitas* (1994) 29 Cal.App.4th 1597, 1602; *Friends of “B” St. v. City of Hayward* (1980) 106 Cal.3d 988, 1002.

The fair argument test stems from the statutory mandate that an EIR be prepared for any project that “may have a significant effect on the environment.” PRC, § 21151; see *No Oil, Inc. v. City of Los Angeles* (1974) 13 Cal.App.3d 68, 75; accord *Jensen v. City of Santa Rosa* (2018) 23 Cal.App.5th 877, 884. Under this test, if a proposed project is not exempt and may cause a significant effect on the environment, the lead agency must prepare an EIR. PRC, §§ 21100 (a), 21151; CEQA Guidelines, § 15064 (a)(1), (f)(1). An EIR may be dispensed with only if the lead agency finds no substantial evidence in the initial study or elsewhere in the record that the project may have a significant effect on the environment. *Parker Shattuck Neighbors v. Berkeley City Council* (2013) 222 Cal.App.4th 768, 785. In such a situation, the agency must adopt a negative declaration. PRC, § 21080, subd. (c)(1); CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15063 (b)(2), 15064(f)(3).

“Significant effect upon the environment” is defined as “a substantial or potentially substantial adverse change in the environment.” PRC, § 21068; CEQA Guidelines, § 15382. A project may have a significant effect on the environment if there is a reasonable probability that it will result in a significant impact. *No Oil, Inc.*, 13 Cal.3d at p. 83 fn. 16; see *Sundstrom v. County of Mendocino* (1988) 202 Cal.App.3d 296, 309. If any aspect of the project may result in a significant impact on the environment, an EIR must be prepared even if the overall effect of the project is beneficial. CEQA Guidelines, § 15063(b)(1); see *County Sanitation Dist. No. 2 v. County of Kern* (2005) 127 Cal.App.4th 1544, 1580.

This standard sets a “low threshold” for preparation of an EIR. *Consolidated Irrigation Dist. v. City of Selma* (2012) 204 Cal.App.4th 187, 207; *Nelson v. County of Kern* (2010) 190 Cal.App.4th 252; *Pocket Protectors v. City of Sacramento* (2004) 124 Cal.App.4th 903, 928; *Bowman v. City of Berkeley* (2004) 122 Cal.App.4th 572, 580; *Citizen Action to Serve All Students v. Thornley* (1990) 222 Cal.App.3d 748, 754; *Sundstrom*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p.

310. If substantial evidence in the record supports a fair argument that the project may have a significant environmental effect, the lead agency must prepare an EIR even if other substantial evidence before it indicates the project will have no significant effect. See *Jensen*, 23 Cal.App.5th at p. 886; *Clews Land & Livestock v. City of San Diego* (2017) 19 Cal.App.5th 161, 183; *Stanislaus Audubon Society, Inc. v. County of Stanislaus* (1995) 33 Cal.App.4th 144, 150; *Brentwood Assn. for No Drilling, Inc. v. City of Los Angeles* (1982) 134 Cal.App.3d 491; *Friends of “B” St.*, 106 Cal.App.3d 988; CEQA Guidelines, § 15064(f)(1).

2. *Background Concerning Initial Studies, Negative Declarations and Mitigated Negative Declarations*

CEQA and CEQA Guidelines are strict and unambiguous about when an MND may be used. A public agency must prepare an EIR whenever substantial evidence supports a “fair argument” that a proposed project “may have a significant effect on the environment.” Pub. Res. Code, §§ 21100, 21151; CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15002, subds. (f)(1)-(2), 15063; *No Oil, Inc.*, 13 Cal.3d at p. 75; *Communities for a Better Environment v. California Resources Agency* (2002) 103 Cal.App.4th 98, 111-112. Essentially, should a lead agency be presented with a fair argument that a project may have a significant effect on the environment, the lead agency shall prepare an EIR even though it may also be presented with other substantial evidence that the project will not have a significant effect. CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15064, subds. (f)(1)-(2); see *No Oil Inc.*, *supra*, 13 Cal.3d at p. 75 (internal citations and quotations omitted). Substantial evidence includes “enough relevant information and reasonable inferences from this information that a fair argument can be made to support a conclusion, even though other conclusions might also be reached.” CEQA Guidelines, § 15384(a).

The fair argument standard is a “low threshold” test for requiring the preparation of an EIR. *No Oil Inc.*, *supra*, 13 Cal.3d at p. 84; *County Sanitation Dist. No. 2 of Los Angeles County v. County of Kern* (2005) 127 Cal.App.4th 1544, 1579. It “requires the preparation of an EIR where there is substantial evidence that any aspect of the project, either individually or cumulatively, may cause a significant effect on the environment, regardless of whether the overall effect of the project is adverse or beneficial[.]” *County Sanitation*, *supra*, 127 Cal.App.4th at p. 1580 (quoting CEQA Guidelines, § 15063(b)(1)). A lead agency may adopt an MND only if “there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.” CEQA Guidelines, § 15074(b).

Evidence supporting a fair argument of a significant environmental impact triggers preparation of an EIR regardless of whether the record contains contrary evidence. *League for Protection of Oakland's Architectural and Historical Resources v. City of Oakland* (1997) 52 Cal.App.4th 896, 904-905. “Where the question is the sufficiency of the evidence to support a fair argument, deference to the agency’s determination is not appropriate[.]” *County Sanitation*, 127 Cal.App.4th at 1579 (quoting *Sierra Club v. County of Sonoma* (1992) 6 Cal.App.4th 1307, 1317-1318).

Further, it is the duty of the lead agency, not the public, to conduct the proper environmental studies. “The agency should not be allowed to hide behind its own failure to gather relevant data.” *Sundstrom*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 311. “Deficiencies in the record may actually enlarge the scope of fair argument by lending a logical plausibility to a wider range of inferences.” *Id.*; see also *Gentry v. City of Murrieta* (1995) 36 Cal.App.4th 1359, 1382 (lack of study enlarges the scope of the fair argument which may be made based on the limited facts in the record).

Thus, refusal to complete recommended studies lowers the already low threshold to establish a fair argument. The court may not exercise its independent judgment on the omitted material by determining whether the ultimate decision of the lead agency would have been affected had the law been followed. *Environmental Protection Information Center v. Cal. Dept. of Forestry* (2008) 44 Cal.4th 459, 486 (internal citations and quotations omitted). The remedy for this deficiency would be for the trial court to issue a writ of mandate. *Id.*

Both the review for failure to follow CEQA’s procedures and the fair argument test are questions of law, thus, the de novo standard of review applies. *Vineyard Area Citizens for Responsible Growth v. City of Rancho Cordova* (2007) 40 Cal.4th 412, 435. “Whether the agency’s record contains substantial evidence that would support a fair argument that the project may have a significant effect on the environment is treated as a question of law. *Consolidated Irrigation Dist.*, 204 Cal.App.4th at p. 207; Kostka and Zischke, *Practice Under the Environmental Quality Act* (2017, 2d ed.) at § 6.76.

In an MND context, courts give no deference to the agency. Additionally, the agency or the court should not weigh expert testimony or decide on the credibility of such evidence—this is one of the EIR’s responsibilities. As stated in *Pocket Protectors v. City of Sacramento*:

Unlike the situation where an EIR has been prepared, neither the lead agency nor a court may “weigh” conflicting substantial evidence to determine whether an EIR must be prepared in the first instance. Guidelines section 15064, subdivision (f)(1) provides in pertinent part: if a lead agency is presented with a fair argument that a project may have a significant effect on the environment, the lead agency shall prepare an EIR even though it may also be presented with other substantial evidence that the project will not have a significant effect. Thus, as *Claremont* itself recognized, [c]onsideration is not to be given contrary evidence supporting the preparation of a negative declaration.

(2004) 124 Cal.App.4th 903, 935 (internal citations and quotations omitted).

In cases where it is not clear whether there is substantial evidence of significant environmental impacts, CEQA requires erring on the side of a “preference for resolving doubts in favor of environmental review.” *Mejia v. City of Los Angeles* (2005) 130 Cal.App.4th 322, 332 “The foremost principle under CEQA is that the Legislature intended the act to be interpreted in such manner as to afford the fullest possible protection to the environment within the reasonable scope of the statutory language. *Friends of Mammoth v. Board of Supervisors* (1972) 8 Cal.3d 247, 259.

3. Background Concerning CEQA Exemptions

Where a lead agency chooses to dispose of CEQA by asserting a CEQA exemption, it has a duty to support its CEQA exemption findings by substantial evidence, including evidence that there are no applicable exceptions to exemptions. This duty is imposed by CEQA and related case law. CEQA Guidelines, § 15020 (The lead agency shall not knowingly release a deficient document hoping that public comments will correct the defects.); see *Citizens for Environmental Responsibility v. State ex rel. 14th Dist. Agriculture Assn.* (2015) 242 Cal.App.4th 555, 568 (The lead agency has the burden of demonstrating that a project falls within a categorical exemption and must support the determination with substantial evidence.); accord *Association for Protection etc. Values v. City of Ukiah* (1991) 2 Cal.App.4th 720, 732 (The Lead agency is required to consider exemption exceptions where there is evidence in the record that the project might have a significant impact.)

The duty to support CEQA and exemption findings with substantial evidence is also required by the Code of Civil Procedure (“CCP”) and case law on administrative or

traditional writs. Under the CCP, an abuse of discretion is established if the decision is unsupported by the findings, or the findings are unsupported by the evidence. CCP, § 1094.5(b). In *Topanga Assn. for a Scenic Community v. County of Los Angeles*, our Supreme Court held that implicit in CCP section 1094.5 is a requirement that the agency which renders the challenged decision must set forth findings to bridge the analytic gap between the raw evidence and ultimate decision or order. (1977) 11 Cal.3d 506, 515 (internal citations and quotations omitted). The lead agency’s findings may be determined to be sufficient if a court has no trouble under the circumstances discerning the analytic route the administrative agency traveled from evidence to action. *West Chandler Blvd. Neighborhood Assn. vs. City of Los Angeles* (2011) 198 Cal.App.4th 1506, 1521-1522 (internal citations and quotations omitted). However, “mere conclusory findings without reference to the record are inadequate.” *Id.* at p. 1521 (finding city council findings conclusory, violating *Topanga Assn. for a Scenic Comm.*).

Further, ***CEQA exemptions must be narrowly construed to accomplish CEQA’s environmental objectives.*** *Cal. Farm Bureau Federation v. Cal. Wildlife Conservation Bd.* (2006) 143 Cal.App.4th 173, 187; accord *Save Our Carmel River v. Monterey Peninsula Water Management Dist.* (2006) 141 Cal.App.4th 677, 697 (“These rules ensure that in all but the clearest cases of categorical exemptions, a project will be subject to some level of environmental review.”)

Finally, CEQA procedures reflect a preference for resolving doubts in favor of environmental review. See Pub. Res. Code, § 21080(c) (an EIR may be disposed of only if there is no substantial evidence, in light of the entire record before the lead agency, that the project may have a significant effect on the environment or revisions in the project); CEQA Guidelines §§ 15061(b)(3) (common sense exemption only where it can be seen *with certainty*); 15063(b)(1) (prepare an EIR if the agency determines that there is substantial evidence that any aspect of the project, either individually or cumulatively, may cause a significant effect on the environment, regardless of whether the overall effect of the project is adverse or beneficial]; 15064, subd. (h) (the agency must consider cumulative impacts of past, current, and probable future projects); 15070 (a negative declaration may be prepared only if there is no substantial evidence, in light of the whole record, that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, or project revisions would avoid the effects or mitigate the effects to a point where clearly no significant effects would occur, and

there is no substantial evidence, in light of the whole record, that the project as revised may have a significant effect on the environment); *No Oil, Inc., supra*, 13 Cal.3d at p. 83-84 (significant impacts are to be interpreted so as to afford the fullest possible protection).

B. The Project Would be Approved in Violation of CEQA as the Section 21159.25 Exemption is Inappropriate for the Project.

The 21159.25 Exemption should not be used to exempt this *large* project from necessary environmental review. The purpose of the 21159.25 Exemption is to extend the Class 32 Exemption to urbanized locations in unincorporated areas. Importantly, the Class 32 Exemption requires the project sites be limited to no more than 5 acres. Here, the Project Site is reported as 3.077 acres. (Staff Report, p. 6.) However, the actual property, with the inclusion of the existing hotel and shops, is **15.99 acres**. (Staff Report, p. 13.) By separating the new development from existing project, the Project Site is artificially reduced. The true Project Site should reflect both the existing buildings along with the proposed additions as this Project is intended to be an extension of the existing hotel. The more accurate acreage highlights that this Project is *simply too big* to be considered under a categorical exemption.

The City has a burden to provide substantial evidence, which must be based upon facts, reasonable assumptions based on facts and expert opinion, rather than the City's mere speculation, to support its findings. CEQA Guidelines § 15384(a); *Save Our Big Trees v. City of Santa Cruz* (2015) 241 Cal. App. 4th 694, 711 (citing *Muzzy Ranch Co. v. Solano County Airport Land Use Com.* (2007) 41 Cal. 4th 372, 386).

C. The Project's Incorporation of Best Management Practices Does Not Negate the Need for Mitigation Measures.

The Staff Report notes improperly labeled mitigation measures as “Best Management Practices” which the CEQA analysis purports will reduce the Project's impacts, such as noise (Staff Report Attachment C, p. 10.) Relying on the Best Management Practices, the Staff Report concludes that the Project will not have any significant impacts that would otherwise make the Section 21159.25 Exemption inapplicable.

However, it is established that “[a]voidance, minimization and / or mitigation measure’ . . . are not ‘part of the project.’ . . . compressing the analysis of impacts and

mitigation measures into a single issue . . . disregards the requirements of CEQA.” (*Lotus v. Department of Transportation* (2014) 223 Cal. App. 4th 645, 656.)

When “an agency decides to incorporate mitigation measures into its significance determination, and relies on those mitigation measures to determine that no significant effects will occur, that agency must treat those measures as though there were adopted following a finding of significance.” (*Lotus, supra*, 223 Cal. App. 4th at 652 [citing CEQA Guidelines § 15091(a)(1) and Cal. Public Resources Code § 21081(a)(1).])

By labeling mitigation measures as best management practices, the County violates CEQA by failing to disclose “the analytic route that the agency took from the evidence to its findings.” (Cal. Public Resources Code § 21081.5; CEQA Guidelines § 15093; *Village Laguna of Laguna Beach, Inc. v. Board of Supervisors* (1982) 134 Cal. App. 3d 1022, 1035 [quoting *Topanga Assn for a Scenic Community v. County of Los Angeles* (1974) 11 Cal. 3d 506, 515.]

As the Project would have significant impacts on Noise without the inclusion of the “Best Management Practices,” the Section 21159.25 Exemption must not be applied to the Project. WSRCC requests further environmental review be prepared to adequately mitigate the Project’s impacts with enforceable measures.

D. The Project May Have Significant Traffic and Air Quality Impacts.

Section 21159.25 includes exceptions to the general exemption in subsection c. Specifically, the following conditions create an exception to the exemption:

- (1) The cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place over time is significant.
- (2) There is a reasonable possibility that the project will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances.
- (3) The project may result in damage to scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway.
- (4) The project is located on a site which is included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.
- (5) The project may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource. (Public Resources Code Section 21159.25(c).)

The proposed Project would inherently create the kind of successive significant impacts described in the first exception, as the Project seeks to expand the already

large hotel and shopping operation. As the original project was evaluated under an EIR,⁹ the County should, at a minimum, require an addendum to the existing EIR. A subsequent or supplemental EIR would also be appropriate for a proposed project of this size.

Many of the comments on the Project thus far have highlighted the significant concerns that the Project will dramatically increase the traffic in an already congested area. Indeed, the traffic analysis performed by the Project Applicant seems to underestimate the Project’s trip generation. Specifically, the external trips assumes that the resort shops will only generate in and out trips in the PM hours. (Staff Report Attachment H, p. 4.)

Table 2
Project Trip Generation Summary – External Trips

Land Use	Size	ADT	AM Peak Trips In - Out	PM Peak Trip In - Out
Apartments – Market Rate Resort (a)	8 Units	54	1 In – Out 2	3 In – 1 Out
Apartments – Employee Affordable (b)	26 Units	94	3 In - 7 Out	5 In - 4 Out
Resort Shops (c)	15,000 SF	299	0 In – 0 Out	10 In – 9 Out
Resort Café (d)	2,500 SF	107	5 In - 5 Out	6 In – 3 Out
Total Trip Generation		554	9 In – 14 Out	24 In -17 Out

- (a) Trip generation based on ITE rates for Multifamily Housing (Low-Rise) (ITE #220).
- (b) Trip generation based on ITE rates for Affordable Housing (ITE #223).
- (c) Trip generation based on ITE rates for Apparel Store (ITE #876), 40% Pass-By
- (d) Trip generation based on ITE rates for High Turnover Sit-Down Restaurant (ITE #932), 43 % Pass-By

It is unclear if the prepared traffic study estimates the trip generation for the Proposed additions or for the entire Project, including the pre-existing stores and hotel. As the Project aims to increase the popularity of the hotel, the existing daily trips should be included in the traffic study to establish the estimated increase on the already burdened neighborhood. The provided traffic study is insufficient to support a finding of no significant traffic impacts by the Proposed Project. WSRCC requests the County perform further, independent evaluation.

Further, the Project plans expect to *remove 50 trees* from the Project Site.

⁹ CEQANet, *Miramar Beach Resort and Bungalows Project (SCH # 2007121158)*, December 28, 2007; available at <https://ceqanet.opr.ca.gov/Project/2007121158>.

Northwest Lot	
Species	Quantity
Mexican Fan Palm	2
African Sumac	5
Coast Live Oak	2
Australian Willow	10
Rosewood	1
Eastern Redbud	1
Strawberry	1
Jacaranda	1
Paperbark	1

Northeast Lot	
Species	Quantity
Strawberry	3
African Sumac	1
Western Sycamore	22

(Staff Report, p. 11)

While the project plans to plant new trees, there is a strong possibility that many of the trees will not survive. As noted by Lara Roman, a U.S. Forest Service researcher who studies tree mortality, “planting a massive number of trees is not necessarily a positive investment if not enough of them survive to become mature plants.”¹⁰ Further, “there’s also a carbon cost to tree-planting, meaning that trees have to survive years before they offset that cost. The largest environmental gain comes when trees mature, sometimes decades after they’re planted.”¹¹ The reduction of mature onsite trees will necessarily result in negative impacts to air quality and GHG emissions.

IV. CONCLUSION

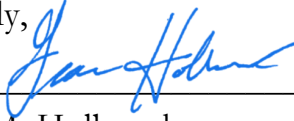
The Proposed Project is inappropriate for the Section 21159.25 Exemption due to its size and under evaluated impacts on the local environment. WSRCC respectfully requests that the Commission require local hire and Covid-19 safe building practices, deny the Project’s CEQA Exemption, and require further environmental review through

¹⁰ Bloomberg, The Darker Side of Tree-Planting Pledges (June 30 2021), available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-07-30/what-happens-after-pledges-to-plant-millions-of-trees?srd=citylab>.

¹¹ *Id.*

an addendum, a subsequent EIR, or a supplemental EIR. If the Commission has any questions, they may reach out to my office for further information.

Sincerely,



Grace M. Holbrook
Attorneys for Western States
Regional Council of Carpenters

Attached:

March 8, 2021 SWAPE Letter to Mitchell M. Tsai re Local Hire Requirements and Considerations for Greenhouse Gas Modeling (Exhibit A);

Air Quality and GHG Expert Paul Rosenfeld CV (Exhibit B); and

Air Quality and GHG Expert Matt Hagemann CV (Exhibit C).