



March 17, 2024

Mayor John Stephens and City Council
City of Costa Mesa
77 Fair Drive
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

SUBJECT: Fairview Park Master Plan Update

Dear Honorable Mayor and Councilmembers:

Coastal Corridor Alliance (CCA) is writing to comment on the upcoming Fairview Park Master Plan update, and in particular, rules around the Harbor Soaring Society's (HSS) location in Fairview Park for its flying activities. In short, our position is to support the native plant and animal species that call Fairview Park home through a science-driven, nature-based decision-making process that limits impactful human activities in Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHA).

HSS Fly Field

We understand that the existing location of the HSS fly field at Fairview Park is an ideal location for flying model airplanes, due to the unique topography, wind movements, and more. Unfortunately, the same location, topography, and wind movements are also ideal for the many native plant and animal species who call this area home. As a reminder, these plants and animals were here long before we were. The current fly field location encroaches on the adjacent native species and habitats, ultimately restricting their freedom and range within the flight and crash zone.

While HSS surely does its best not to impact the habitats it has activities in, based on our observations we believe that disturbances are inevitable in the current location. CCA holds monthly events on the same days as HSS fly days, and has witnessed several conflicts. Two regular disturbances we see are: (1) soaring birds flying close to flying planes, sometimes with near contact, and (2) plane crashes and subsequent equipment retrieval in closed off areas of

native habitat. HSS has also been observed mowing protected plant species which provide native animals crucial food and shelter.

HSS Fly Field Impacts

The West side of Fairview Park is designated as open space for habitat and passive recreation designed to minimally impact the areas reserved for native species. With additional new information, it is clear that the fly field is not in a compatible location. There is also now professional evidence from multiple biologists and documents that the fly field does in fact sit within the protected sensitive and rare vernal pool complex. There are also numerous protected species observed with designated buffers containing the fly field location: Burrowing owls, Crotch's bumblebee, San Diego Fairy Shrimp, White Tail Kite, Northern Harrier, and more. The vernal pools, surrounding plant communities, and the airspace above them form extremely rare and crucial habitats, needed for many species to survive.

Requirements for Species Protection

Please uphold these legally protected areas, species, and habitats by working with HSS to relocate the fly field. We understand that decades of use at this site is difficult to give up. But, the habitats and species impacted existed there for thousands of years, and fly field activities began before scientific evidence existed of the important habitat and species there. With new information, comes an evolution of position-based on science and the laws passed to protect these habitats including the California Coastal Act and the California and federal Endangered Species Act.

OC Model Engineers

Related to the activities of OC Model Engineers (OCME) and the model train operations as a potential double standard, we do not see a conflict. OCME does not impact airspace, or have regular mishaps bringing them into protected areas. The area where OCME operates is also not as sensitive for species and habitats as the current fly field location. For these reasons, CCA could support HSS relocating to a fly area near the OCME track, which has the infrastructure needed for successful flying, while being considerably less impactful to species and habitats.

Should HSS remain at its current location, we recommend (1) the airstrip be modified to avoid impacts to the adjacent vernal pools, (2) that pilots be required to take extra caution to avoid flying near birds and (3) to avoid losing control of the airplanes impacting the large vernal pool (vernal pool 1).

CCA/HSS History of Collaboration

HSS and CCA have a history of mutual support. In 2016, CCA (under our previous name Banning Ranch Conservancy) worked to fight Newport Beach development plans on Banning Ranch. Members of Banning Ranch Conservancy worked with members of HSS to fly planes with cameras attached over Banning Ranch to take aerial photos, showing vernal pools and other ESHA that were not included in the development's Environmental Impact Report (EIR). We have praised HSS' role in proving the inevitable impacts of development on these sensitive habitats and the associated sensitive native species> This collaboration ultimately led to the Coastal Commission's denial of the development permit in 2016.

HSS has been an amazing force for good in the Newport-Mesa area, exposing people of all ages to the joys of engineering, aerospace, other applied sciences, and in our case, conservation. We support HSS' role in our community, its appropriate use of Fairview Park, and hope it has a long future of flight and positive impact on our communities.

To summarize, CCA supports a science-driven, nature-based decision process that prioritizes the plants and animals and supports their protection over impactful human uses. Without immediate action, the impacts could lead to a decision that shuts down the HSS field permanently without relocation from natural resource agencies.

Should you have questions, we can be reached at (949) 216-0880.

Sincerely,

Terry M. Welsh, MD
President