MBCA's "SoapBox" submission to the Hi Desert Star, September 12, 2016

Support JT Community Plan and Altamira Appeal

The Morongo Basin Conservation Association (MBCA) joins others objecting to the harm the 248 unit 105 acre Altamira Gated Housing Development would have on the Joshua Tree (JT) community character, safety of residents, and the health of the natural desert environment.

The County Board of Supervisors (BOS) heard an appeal on September 13th challenging the earlier Planning Commission approval of the Altamira project. Residents packed the JT Burke Government Center and others trekked to San Bernardino to speak to Supervisors.

Supervisors James Ramos and Robert Lovingood expressed support for the appeal. However, Janice Rutherford and Curt Hagman endorsed the development. A decision was delayed until all Supervisors are present. Josie Gonzales will cast the deciding vote at the September 27th meeting. We implore Supervisor Gonzales to respect the adopted JT Community Plan (CP) created to define and maintain our unique characteristics.

The Community Plan (CP) was adopted into the General Plan (GP) in 2007. It customizes the GP to meet specific needs and circumstances of our community. The south boundary of JT shares many of the rural characteristics of Joshua Tree National Park including the iconic Joshua tree, Mojave Yucca, and creosote rings. Also important are the hillsides, scenic vistas, drainage areas, habitat, and unique geologic features. The tendency of the drainages and hillsides to flash flood and burn is unmentioned in the planning documents. In fact, JTNP's only mention is as a recreation area for future residents.

Residents of the walled development would enter from Sunny Vista Drive and exit onto Alta Loma Drive. The development would share its east wall with Friendly Hills Elementary School. Build-out (if ever) could take as long as 15 years and be a continual disruption of the students' learning environment. The school's front door faces Sunny Vista and the morning and evening traffic contends with a dangerous four way stop with Alta Loma. The 2011 Traffic Analysis did not count this traffic nor is there mitigation (a signal) to provide for student safety. The analysis neglects the increasing tourist and local traffic, all days of the week, which use Alta Loma as an alternate to Hwy. 62.

In its Population analysis the County found that Altamira would result in *less than significant substantial growth*. However, an estimated 665 persons living in Altamira's 248 homes would increase the community's population of 7,414 persons by 8%. The historical growth rate over 20 years is 1.5%. Density is an issue. JT is spread over 37 square miles with 200 persons/square mile. Altamira would jam 665 persons on less than two tenths of a square mile - just shy of Orange County's

density. JT does have dense development close to the downtown area, where it belongs. County staff's Recommendations for project approval include: *This project meets a high standard of low density, low impact development.* Go figure.

The appeal maintains that an Environmental Impact Report is necessary to fully understand the project's scope. Impacts to the public must be analyzed according to CEQA guidelines, and determined to be consistent with the GP, CP, and all codes and ordinances.

Coincidentally, last week County staff was in the Morongo Basin to lead workshops to develop Community Plans with the HVCC (Homestead Valley Community Council), Pioneertown, and Morongo Valley. Residents met to define their community's unique characteristics and values. We participate in this process in the good faith that the Plan created will guide the community's future development. Our unincorporated communities look to the BOS to honor our Community Plans created to protect the unique character of Basin communities.

For more about the Altamira development:
http://www.mbconservation.org/alta_mira_housing_project

 Sarah Kennington, President MBCA