



Natural History Museum
of Los Angeles County
900 Exposition Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90007
tel 213.763.3301
fax 213.746.7538
www.nhm.org

Dr. Lori Bettison-Varga
President and Director

February 4, 2025

The Honorable Board of Supervisors County of Los Angeles
383 Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street Los
Angeles, California 90012

Dear Supervisors:

**LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
LA BREA TAR PITS MASTER PLAN PROJECT
CERTIFY THE FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT, ADOPT THE
MITIGATION MONITORING AND REPORTING PROGRAM AND ENVIRONMENTAL
FINDINGS OF FACT AND STATEMENT OF OVERRIDING CONSIDERATIONS, AND
APPROVE THE PROJECT**

(SECOND DISTRICT) (3 VOTES)

SUBJECT

This letter recommends approval of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History - La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Refined Alternative 3 Project; certification of the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History for the La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Project; and adoption of the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program and Environmental Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations.

IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT THE BOARD:

1. Certify that the Final Environmental Impact Report for the proposed Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Project has been

completed in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act and reflects the independent judgment and analysis of the County; find that the Board has reviewed and considered the information in the Final Environmental Impact Report prior to approving the Project, adopt the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program, finding that the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program is adequately designed to ensure compliance with the mitigation measures during project implementation, including for the Refined Alternative 3 Project; and determine that the significant adverse effects of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Project, including the Recommended Project, have either have been reduced to an acceptable level, or are outweighed by the specific overriding considerations of the Project, as outlined in the Environmental Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations, which Findings and Statement are adopted and incorporated herein by reference.

2. Approve the proposed Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Refined Alternative 3 Project.

PURPOSE/JUSTIFICATION OF RECOMMENDED ACTION

Approval of the recommended actions will certify the Final Environmental Impact Report (Final EIR) and approve the proposed Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Refined Alternative 3 Project (Recommended Project) which includes constructing a new building, renovating the George C. Page Museum, and renovating related landscaping of the 13-acre site of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History – La Brea Tar Pits located in Hancock Park; certification of the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History for the La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Project; and adoption of the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program and Environmental Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History (Museum) is committed to principles of accessibility and engagement and to being a hub for discoveries and dialogue around critical issues of global significance and local impact. The Museum's three strategic goals guide how, through research and unparalleled collections, it interacts with internal and external communities to: 1) expand its role as museums of, for, and with Los Angeles; 2) create an interdisciplinary model for understanding and connecting to urban nature; and 3) strengthen and activate its research and collections to create and communicate new knowledge about our world.

In March 2019, as provided for under the Operating Agreement between the Los Angeles County (County) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History Foundation (Museum Foundation), the Museum Foundation initiated a public selection process for an international architecture firm to reimagine La Brea Tar Pits 13-acre campus for the next era of research and public service. A transformed La Brea Tar Pits campus, a once-in-a-century project, would be one of the most consequential cultural and

scientific sites in the world, enhancing this beloved destination to become an unmatched resource and call to action for Angelenos and international visitors.

The Board of Supervisors' approval of the Recommended Project would significantly expand scientific, educational and inspirational collaborations. Science discovery would grow exponentially at the world's most important Ice Age fossil excavation site. The Recommended Project will double the research lab facilities, strengthening the Museum's capacity to conduct world-class research on our changing planet. It would also expand its role as a preeminent research hub, attracting leading scientists and fostering global collaborations.

The Recommended Project would double public access to the world's only active urban fossil excavation site, which through expanded educational programs, would accommodate 800,000 visitors annually to witness and participate in scientific discoveries in real time. The plan would significantly expand immersive, hands-on educational opportunities, doubling the number of school children to 75,000 annually and would increase exhibition space by 20%.

Located in the Miracle Mile neighborhood of Los Angeles on the famed Wilshire Boulevard, and as the world's only continuously active paleontological excavation site and research facility in a major urban area, La Brea Tar Pits and the George C. Page Museum (Page Museum) together—and as part of Hancock Park—comprise one of the County's and City's most beloved and best-known cultural and natural resources.

The Recommended Project would result in a reimagined site design, expansion, and upgrades for the Tar Pits complex and the 13-acre portion of Hancock Park, including renovations to the Page Museum.

The Recommended Project elements include:

- Renovating the Page Museum within the existing building footprint of approximately 63,200 square feet, including deferred maintenance of the building and systems and to meet modern seismic, electrical, and building code standards. The renovation would also allow much of the collection space to be reorganized and enlarged to provide better housing and display of the collections to the public. The enlarged storage for the collections and renovated labs would accommodate additional storage, state-of-the-art research facilities, and space for visiting researchers.
- Retaining the central open-air courtyard as an indoor-outdoor integration of the museum and as a primary character-defining feature and the space frame that supports the frieze.
- Retaining the structural space frame that supports the frieze, including the openair, steel-grid roof that enhances the indoor-outdoor integration of the Page Museum and is a primary character-defining feature that would not be altered or capped.

- Constructing a new museum building of approximately 40,000 square feet, including a new cafe, farther to the north and west of the Page Museum, allowing for more separation of the new museum from the existing Page Museum, while also allowing for an increase in square footage to the Central Green community space.
- Revising the programming for interior spaces of the Page Museum and the new museum building, resulting in changes and improvements to the location of the theater, classrooms, the retail store, and other interior elements.
- Reconfiguring on-site surface parking to complement the adjusted new building footprint, extending north of the new museum building and maintaining the number of parking spaces that currently exist on-site, with the inclusion of required electric vehicle charging stations, with entrances from 6th Street and Curson Avenue.
- Reconfiguring the existing main entrance of the Page Museum to become a new outdoor classroom and education entrance, which would include the planting of trees to shade the proposed stepped seating.
- Connecting the Page Museum and the new museum building with a covered, open-air breezeway. An entrance would be incorporated into the northwestern corner of the Page Museum to provide access to the breezeway, thereby retaining more of the original character-defining features and materials of the historical resource.
- Removing a portion of the berm at the northwest corner to accommodate a new entrance to the Page Museum. Modification of the west and north sides of the berm would still be necessary and would allow for an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ramp up to the terrace level on the west. The berms on the east and south side would be maintained, along with new berms on the west side of the new building.
- Renovating the existing entrance to La Brea Tar Pits at Wilshire Boulevard and South Curson Avenue with a shaded canopy and new welcome pavilion.
- Renovating the existing entrance at the northwest corner of West 6th Street and the entrance to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art service drive with a shaded canopy and new welcome pavilion.
- Reconfiguring the existing pedestrian pathways on-site into a continuous and ADA accessible paved path linking the existing features of the project site; improvements to the Central Green community space, and establishment of a children's play area, picnic areas, and a possible future small dog park.

- Renovating the excavation compound including Pit 91 and Project 23 to better serve both research and educational programs.
- Renovating the existing facilities at all the tar pits in the northwestern portion of the project site, including removal and replacement of some vegetation. Establishment of three distinct landscaping zones encircled by a looping pedestrian path. The landscaping currently includes more than 330 trees on the project site. The Recommended Project would require removal and replacement and/or relocation of between 150 and 200 trees. The planting strategy includes the planting (introduction or relocation) of a similar number of trees as would be removed. It is estimated that some percentage of the 150 to 200 trees to be removed may be eligible to be successfully relocated rather than replaced. The Recommended Project would also create three biofiltration areas for stormwater management.

BACKGROUND

Hancock Park is a 23-acre parcel, bounded by Wilshire Boulevard to the south, Sixth Street to the north, Fairfax Avenue to the west, and Curson Avenue to the east. Created in 1923, when oil tycoon George Allan Hancock donated it to the County in an effort to preserve the land and guarantee that the fossils discovered in its tar pits would be properly archived and exhibited, Hancock Park today is home to La Brea Tar Pits and the Page Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures (Academy Museum). Together, Hancock Park and its resident institutions comprise one of the County's and City's most prized cultural assets, hosting millions of local and out-of-town visitors annually.

La Brea Tar Pits, their attendant research stations, and the Page Museum reside on approximately 13 acres of Hancock Park. This part of the park campus is also a recreation area highly valued by its neighbors for its walking paths, picnic tables, and grassy open areas—in addition to the tar pits themselves. Thanks to a family of fullscale mammoth models at the edge of the Lake Pit, at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Curson Avenue, La Brea Tar Pits are also a well-known visual symbol of the County's cultural and natural history.

In addition to the tar pits and the Page Museum, the campus comprises several active research sites, called "digs," the modest Observation Pit building from the 1950s (refurbished in 2014), a concession building, public restrooms, and a parking lot. The site also hosts simulated Pleistocene landscapes and contemporary gardens. Among the most popular features of the campus are the broad, sloping grass hills that encase the Page Museum, which was built as a largely subterranean structure to preserve as much of the park as possible.

La Brea Tar Pits is an enormously popular and important cultural asset for the County and City, attracting neighbors, school children from across the metropolitan area, and

visitors/tourists from around the world. The Page Museum welcomes nearly 425,000 visitors annually. Hancock Park is visited by an estimated 2 million people each year. As an active research site, the Tar Pits also host scientists and researchers on an ongoing basis.

La Brea Tar Pits and the Page Museum define the eastern third of Hancock Park. Wayfinding and signage in the park were installed in the early 2000s, and modest park improvements have been studied and implemented by architects, landscape architects, and designers periodically for years. But the basic shape and form of the Tar Pits has not changed significantly since 1977, when the Page Museum opened. The Page Museum, designed by Los Angeles architects Frank Thornton and Willis Fagan, is a pyramidal Brutalist construction, burrowed into the earth and surmounted with an extraordinary 10-foot-high, four-sided fiberglass frieze of Ice Age landscapes, plants, and mammals, created by the sculptor Manuel Paz. Thornton and Fagan buried their building to preserve as much of Hancock Park as possible and to create a viewing environment that suggested an excavation to visitors. Because most of the building is subterranean, the mural is its most visible architectural attraction from the street. It surrounds a 9,000-square-foot, 50-foot-high central atrium about which rotate 28,000 square feet of exhibition and conservation spaces, and an additional 20,000 square feet of climate-controlled storage.

Though generally well maintained, the Page Museum has not been significantly renovated or updated since it opened, and its collections and research activities long ago outgrew the building as designed. Further, its mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems are outmoded and overtaxed, and water penetration into the building remains a challenge. Storage is neither easy to maintain climatologically nor easy to access (one must traverse the entire perimeter to reach certain sections). Due to the building's shape and underground location, it is difficult to modify or expand. Its exhibition galleries and storage areas are largely inflexible, challenging the institution's ability to adapt to changing notions of exhibition, education, research, and storage. Though sound, the Page Museum's structural systems predate and complicate seismic retrofitting. Finally, the Page Museum is impacted by climate events and climate resilience for the structure and the collections is critical.

The grass-covered sloping walls of the Page Museum, as noted above, are an important and beloved feature of Hancock Park's landscape: at nearly every moment of the day, children, and even adults, can be seen sunbathing on—or even more popular, rolling down—its sides. The rest of the park grounds are crisscrossed by pathways that lead visitors around the hill of the Page Museum and between the various tar pits. There are clusters of trees, particularly closer to LACMA, as well as human-made interventions like benches and seats scattered about the site. Though pleasant enough, the existing park grounds landscape design is modest and dominated by non-native trees.

The Museum Foundation selected three final architectural firms to participate in a 2day gathering in June 2021 (called the “Incubator”) of leading thinkers from a variety of fields to consider the question of how La Brea Tar Pits and the Page Museum can become new models for museums and education centers about Earth history, climate change, and all living things on this planet. With an overwhelming support from both internal and external received comments, Weiss/Manfredi Architects was selected to begin the design phase of the Reimagined La Brea Tar Pits Project.

The requested approval would allow the Museum Foundation to initiate a more robust private and public fundraising/funding campaign, and the Museum would return to the Board of Supervisors to recommend a County and Museum Foundation funding/financing plan for the Board’s approval.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

This requested approval of the Recommended Project would support the County Strategic Plan:

* North Star 2, Foster Vibrant and Resilient Communities through Focus Area D, Sustainability Strategies i and iii by mitigating climate change, building resilient communities, and supporting thriving ecosystems, habitats, and biodiversity, and through Focus Area Goal F, Community Connections by investing in our communities and creating public spaces and programs that are welcoming, accessible, where all residents can easily build relationships, create social networks, feel connected and can access opportunities; and

* North Star 3, Realize Tomorrow’s Government Today, through Focus Area Goal C, Equity-Centered Policies and Practices, Strategy i by implementing projects that are equity-based and seek racial, social, and economic equity in County parks and Focus Area Goal G, Internal Controls and Processes, Strategy ii by effectively managing a County park asset in ways that are fiscally responsible and align with the County’s highest-priority needs.

FISCAL IMPACT/FINANCING

In Fiscal Years 2018-2022, the Board of Supervisors approved a total of \$22,000,000 towards the proposed project which was partially used to fund the conceptual and schematic design services, the preparation of the environmental documentation, and other consultant services related to building infrastructure and the unique site location. During this same period, the Museum Foundation was and continues to fundraise through donor contributions and grants to fund the remaining balance needed for design development and construction plans services, as well as the construction phase for the project.

The project is not yet fully funded. The Museum Foundation is in the process of establishing fundraising goals for the project to secure private financing for a substantial portion of the project development costs. According to the Museum Foundation, your Board's approval of the recommendations above will allow the Museum Foundation to initiate more robust private and public fundraising efforts, including applying for public and private grants. We anticipate that the Museum Foundation will request additional County contribution to the Project in Fiscal Year 2027-28, subject to your Board's consideration then and in the context of the County's budgetary constraints at the time.

FACTS AND PROVISIONS/LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

The County and Museum Foundation entered into an Operating Agreement dated July 1994, with subsequent amendments, providing for the Museum Foundation to provide financial, in-kind, or in-time support and assistance for several services including design and development of exhibitions and capital projects.

As previously stated, the Museum Foundation Board Architect Selection Committee issued a Request for Information from five or six firms for interviews in early May 2019 in Los Angeles. Selected members of the Museum staff and the Museum Foundation Board Selection Committee visited the final three architectural firms' offices and/or their previous work as part of their deliberations.

The Museum Foundation Board Architect Selection Committee, after site visits, deliberations and community support, selected Weiss/Manfredi Architects to begin the conceptual plan and design phases for the proposed Project.

ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTATION

Early in the environmental review process and based on a preliminary review of the proposed project and consistent with section 15060(d) of the State CEQA Guidelines, the County determined that a comprehensive Environmental Impact Report (EIR) would be prepared for the proposed Project. Consistent with CEQA Guidelines section 15063(a), the County determined that an Initial Study was not necessary. Pursuant to CEQA, the potential environmental effects of the proposed Project have been analyzed in a Draft EIR and circulated for public review and comment. All the topics identified in Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines (the Initial Study checklist) are addressed in the EIR. A Final EIR subsequently has been prepared in compliance with the requirements of CEQA and is on file with the Clerk of the Board and the documents filed with the Board include the comments received; responses to comments; and revisions, clarifications, and corrections to the Draft EIR. Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment 1), and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (Attachment 2) are also provided to the Board.

On February 14, 2022, a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft EIR for the proposed Project was released by the County as lead agency. The NOP was distributed to interested parties and all landowners, homeowners, and tenants within a 1,000-foot radius of the subject property, circulated to governmental agencies and organizations posted on Natural History Museum's website. The 30-day NOP comment period was extended through March 16, 2022. Two public scoping meetings were held virtually via Zoom on March 2, 2022, to provide a description of the project and solicit input from any interested parties on the scope and content of the EIR in conformance with PRC section 21083.9. Live language interpretation of the presentation and scoping meetings input was provided in Spanish and Korean.

Public Notice of the Draft EIR was published in the Los Angeles Times on September 11, 2023, pursuant to California Public Resources Code section 20192 and posted pursuant to section 21092.3. The public review period ran from September 11, 2023, through October 26, 2023. In addition, a public meeting was held on September 30, 2023, at La Brea Tar Pits to present project information, provide information on the Draft EIR. During the public review period, the County received 35 comment documents from public agencies, organizations, and individuals. Two public agencies submitted comments on the Draft EIR, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the California Department of Transportation, District 7. Responses to all comments received from public agencies were sent pursuant to section 21092.5 of the Public Resources Code.

Areas of controversy raised by commenters primarily included concerns regarding the overall design of the Project as it relates to protecting the passive recreational spaces and pedestrian pathways in and around the Lake Pit; the potential for project renovations to increase light pollution in the area; changes to landscaping and the potential for tree removal and/or replacement within the Project site; and impacts of the project on traffic and circulation in and around the Project site. To the extent these issues and concerns are within the scope of CEQA, they are addressed in the evaluation and identification of potential mitigation measures for each environmental issue area included in the Final EIR. In addition, information to respond to the topics of potential controversy is also included in the response to comments included in Volume I of the Final EIR.

The Final EIR (Volumes I and II) and related documents including the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program, are available at: <https://tarpits.org/public-process>.

The County considered the EIR evaluation with respect to the Draft EIR comments made by the commenting entities and individuals. Many comments noted that the full building out of the Master Plan, as reflected in the Draft EIR, would result in both historic resources losing their eligibility, and an overall loss to the broad architectural and cultural heritage of Los Angeles County. Additionally, some comments opined that the footprint of the project was too large and expressed that alternatives should be considered which would result in fewer impacts to the Page Museum. As a result, the County conducted further

feasibility studies of the original Alternative 3 and confirmed that the original Alternative 3 is feasible, and that further exploration of the alternative should occur to determine if additional improvements could be made to the alternative to address the comments received on the Draft EIR. The Final EIR expands the consideration of the original Alternative 3 with a refined version of the alternative. Approval of Revised Alternative 3, the Recommended Project, would not create additional or more intense environmental impacts than those previously disclosed when compared to the original Alternative 3 concept, as addressed in the Final EIR.

In addition, all tribal resources consultation requirements of CEQA have been met and documented in accordance with Public Resources Code sections 21080.3.1 and 21080.3.2 (Assembly Bill 52). Per tribal representative request, the County consulted with four tribal organizations: Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, Gabrieleno Band of Mission Indians – Kizh Nation, Gabrieleno/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians, and Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California Tribal Council. The requested consultation and informational outreach were completed. Based upon the record of the Project, which includes communications with each of the tribal representatives, the County has included mitigation measures to avoid or reduce to less-than-significant levels the Recommended Project's potential impacts on tribal cultural resources. The mitigation measures are included in the Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment 1) and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (Attachment 2).

Except for unavoidable significant impacts related to historical resources as a result of project construction, land use and planning (related to consistency with historical resources protection policies and construction of the project), and operational transportation effects, all identified significant environmental effects of the Project can be avoided or reduced to levels that are less than significant through the implementation of the mitigation measures identified in the Final EIR. As stated in the Final EIR and attached Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment 1), the Recommended Project, Revised Alternative 3, would result in unavoidable significant impacts to historical resources as a result of project construction, land use and planning (related to consistency to historical resources protection policies and construction of the project), and operational transportation effects, but such impacts have been reduced to the extent feasible, and the benefits of the proposed Project include, in part, the elimination of safety and seismic concerns in County buildings; a new code-compliant, energy-efficient, world class cultural facility for the public's use and benefit; a construction that would limit the duration and extent of potential impacts; and a design that would promote the balanced display of La Brea Tar Pits, the world's most important Ice Age fossil site and other benefits included in the Statement of Overriding Considerations, outweigh these unavoidable adverse impacts.

A Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (Attachment 2) will ensure compliance with the mitigation measures during Project implementation.

The documents and other materials constituting the record of the proceedings upon which the Board of Supervisors decision is based in this matter are located at the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum, located at 900 Exposition Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90007, and the County Chief Executive Office. The custodian of such documents and record of proceedings is Dr. Lori Bettison-Varga, President and Director, Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, County of Los Angeles.

The Project is not exempt from payment of a fee to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) pursuant to section 711.4 of the Fish and Game Code to defray the costs of fish and wildlife protection and management incurred by CDFW. Upon the Board's certification of the Final EIR and approval of the Recommended Project, the County Museum of Natural History will file a Notice of Determination with the County Clerk and pay the required fees and with the State Clearinghouse in the Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation in accordance with California Public Resources Code section 21152 and will post the Notice to the County's website in accordance with section 21092.2.

CONTRACTING PROCESS

As authorized under the Operating Agreement, contracts for design and environmental documentation of the Recommended Project have been negotiated and executed by the Museum Foundation.

IMPACT ON CURRENT SERVICES (OR PROJECTS)

The approval of the recommended action will not have any impact on current County services or projects.

CONCLUSION

It is requested that the Executive Office, Board of Supervisors, return two certified copies of the Minute Order, and the adopted and stamped Board letter to the Natural History Museum, 900 Exposition Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90007 for further processing.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lori Bettison-Varga". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Lori Bettison-Varga
Director

LBV:CM:JR

The Honorable Board of Supervisors
February 4, 2025
Page 12

Attachments:

1. Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations
2. Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program

C: Executive Office, Board of Supervisors
Chief Executive Office
County Counsel
Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History Foundation

Attachments:

[La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Final EIR_Volume I](#)

[La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Final EIR Volume II](#)

[La Brea Tar Pits Master Plan Final EIR Appendices to Volume II](#)

[Attach 1-LBTP MP EIR Findings and SOC](#)

[Attach 2-LPTB MP MitMntRptingPrgrm](#)