

Wonder Valley Residents, Having Confirmed Resort With Homes Will Total 160 Acres, Press For Full-Blown EIR

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The recent revelation that the proponents of the Wonder Valley Inn intend to augment that project slated for just over 21 acres at the corner of Amboy Road and Gammel Road with a residential component on the surrounding 138.78 acres has prompted an even greater degree of alarm among local residents than they have evinced since they learned early last year about the prospective hotel development project.

In November 2021, Alan Greenberg and Jason Landver applied for a conditional use permit, including a rezoning request, for the majority of 21.22 acres on the corner lot site in the remote desert community which are currently zoned for low density housing.

The 3.18 acres closest to the confluence of paved Amboy Road and dirt-surfaced Gammel Road is already zoned for commercial service use, while the remaining 18.4 acres bear the county's RL-5 zoning designation. Greenberg's and Landver's request of the San Bernardino County Land Use Services Department has been to designate all 21.22 acres as suitable for commercial service use, or CS in the county's zoning parlance. The current RL-5 designation allows single family homes on lots no smaller than five acres. Greenberg and Landver have acquired 160 acres at the Amboy/Gammel corner location.

Last week, Landver in a statement to the *Sentinel* confirmed that he and Greenberg, who are being assisted by development consultant David Mlynarski, are purposed to see the entirety of the 160 acres built upon. In his free-ranging interview, Landver said that he and Greenberg will abide by the existing zoning on the 138.78 acres they own that will be left after the hotel is built. In this way, he said, roughly 20 homes will be placed on the property. He emphasized that they will be prefabricated single-story structures of right around 2,000 square feet each.

Landver's acknowledgement of the residential component of their development was significant. Though there had been rumors to the effect that what Greenberg and Landver had embarked upon would not confine itself to the resort complex alone, their application to the county gave no indication that they were going to construct anything other than the 106-room hotel along with an all-night restaurant, a spa/wellness center, conference hall and event center, a 6,000-square foot swimming pool, hot tubs, outdoor showers and a 205-space parking lot.

Water is to be supplied by two existing wells on the property linked to a 180,000-gallon water tank. The project is to include a septic leech field system for the treatment of wastewater, which is to then be used for outdoor irrigation. The design is to include solar panels intended to supply at least a portion of the electricity to be used on site. Mlynarski has said the resort will rely on the local utility provider for the balance of the electricity needed at the site.

Landver downplayed the impact that the development would have on the local area and its current serenity. He suggested that the objections that Wonder Valley residents were raising with regard to the intrusiveness of the undertaking were misplaced.

The resort, he insisted, will be "ecologically friendly and self-contained, an eco-reserve that will confine itself to zero use of energy. We want to make it completely self-sustained."

Wonder Valley is proximate to the entrance to Joshua Tree National Monument, and he suggested it was selfish of Wonder Valley residents to begrudge the building of a hotel intended to provide tourists seeking to experience the park "a place to rest their heads at night. We are looking forward to creating an increase in tourism. [Joshua Tree National Park] is one of the wonders of the world. What we are doing will help people to discover and enjoy that amazing park. We think that's a good thing for society, to make it so more people can appreciate that desert land."

Landver emphasized that the project would bring economic development to the area and increase tax revenues,, while simultaneously seeking to soft-pedal the degree to which the development would impact the rural character and desert tranquility that is the area's signature feature now.

“I understand that the people who live there want to see the dark night sky and feel the calm air,” Landver said. “We want to provide that setting for others who do not live there. We don’t want to light up the dark sky. We do not want to disrupt the stillness. We will have meditation rooms that local residents can use. The restaurant will be another place for the residents to enjoy.”

Landver said the resort will, if all goes as planned, open to the public at some point in 2025. The homes might be ready for occupancy in 2026, he said.

Landver did not seem to appreciate the significance of his acknowledgment that the development at the site was to go beyond the resort hotel.

In evaluating the project application, San Bernardino County Land Use Services consented to using a mitigated negative declaration, also referred to as an initial study, as the means of providing the project with its environmental certification.

Under the California Environmental Quality Act, a mitigated negative declaration is one of the least exacting types of development impact assessment there is. Wonder Valley residents had already expressed the belief that the approval process for the project should entail an environmental impact report, the most involved type of environmental analysis and certification there is. An environmental impact report consists of an in-depth study of the project site, the project proposal, the potential and actual impacts the project will have on the site and surrounding area in terms of all conceivable issues, including land use, water use, air quality, potential contamination, noise, traffic, and biological and cultural resources. An environmental impact report specifies in detail what measures can, will and must be carried out to offset those impacts.

Neither of the two San Bernardino County Department of Land Use Services staff members who are processing Greenberg & Landver’s application, Senior Planner Azhar Khan and Supervising Planner Chris Warrick, were aware that the entire 160 acres that Greenburg and Landver had acquired were to be developed, essentially, together. This puts the soundness of their decision to allow a mitigated negative declaration to suffice as the environmental certification for the hotel

project in doubt. Allowing the residential properties to be developed while allowing Gammel Road to remain unpaved, would seem to involve less than sterling quality planning. Moreover, if Gammel Road were to be paved, a more comprehensive environmental examination of the developmental impacts would be in order. Landver's acknowledgment that he and Greenberg intend to proceed with a project or combination of projects entailing nearly eight times as much land as was previously indicated throws into doubt whether they can proceed with the project by carrying out an environmental certification on the cheap.

Upon learning about the project proposal, Wonder Valley residents coalesced into a working group calling itself Stop Wonder Inn Project. Its members have undertaken a grassroots effort to question the San Bernardino County Land Use Services Department about the project, determine its scope and put on record the Wonder Valley community's protests with regard to the untoward impacts its members believe the project will entail. The stated intent of the effort, as the group's name implies, is to prevent the project from proceedings. Among individual members of the group and residents of Wonder Valley generally, attitudes range from shutting the door on the project altogether to accepting that the project is to proceed, but nevertheless ensuring that the county's planners insist on subjecting every aspect of the project that will negatively impact the project site, its near environs, the area, the community and its residents to all reasonable, foreseeable and conceivable efforts at mitigation.

Wonder Valley resident Eric Hamburg is a prime mover among the members of Stop Wonder Inn Project and the webmaster of the group's website, stopwonderinn.org,

Hamburg took issue with much of what Landver told the *Sentinel*.

With regard to Landver's representation that the resort would be "ecologically friendly and self-contained, an eco-reserve that will confine itself to zero use of energy," Hamburg said, "There is nothing significant in the initial study/mitigated negative declaration that specifies that the resort will be 'ecologically friendly and self-contained' or 'an eco-reserve that will confine itself to zero use of energy.' It will be connected to the Southern California Edison grid and will compete against the existing Southern California Edison infrastructure which is already prone to

outages, and they don't propose ways to work to assure that Wonder Valley residents will not experience the impacts of that."

Additionally there is nothing in the initial study/mitigated negative declaration that would implement a development that would be 'ecologically friendly and self-contained' other than marketing spin. They will be draining water from our shared aquifer, and none of the documentation supporting that is indicated in valid studies that show the current status of that aquifer. The last surveys of the aquifer in Wonder Valley date back to the 1970s. There are no studies that document the impact on the aquifer that were caused by the years-long drain of water resources by illegal marijuana grows – one of the largest in San Bernardino County, that was directly to the east of this proposed development."

Hamburg continued, "The water studies and the negative mitigated declaration as to water use and treatment are questionable, as pointed out in detail by the Stop Wonder Inn Project's 187-page response to the county as well as comments submitted by other concerned parties. An environmental impact report needs to be executed. It is difficult to 'buy' the contention that the proposed development will be 'ecologically friendly,' for example, when the developers and the initial study/mitigated negative declaration have ignored a scientifically valid survey of the presence of desert tortoises that would be eradicated by its construction and operation. There are sanitation and other environmental factor concerns included in our response to the county."

As to Landver's downplaying of the degree to which the projects he and Greenberg are proposing will impact the Wonder Valley district, Hamburg said, "In the 264 comments submitted to the county in objection to the initial study/mitigated negative declaration via a comment form on stopwonderinn.org, a large number of them express deep concerns as to how the proposed development will impact the current 'rural and remote aspect of the district.' Impacts of noise, dust, and light pollution are just some of the concerns that many residents and visitors have expressed and which are not adequately 'mitigated' in the initial study/mitigated negative declaration. It is hard to take Landver's 'downplaying' of these concerns as seriously informed." Hamburg added, "Importantly, nowhere in Landver's comments nor in

the initial study/mitigated negative declaration are the land use elements of the San Bernardino Countywide Plan mentioned or any justifications or mitigations that the proposal conforms to that plan.”

Hamburg referenced compatibility with existing uses, compatibility with planned uses, compatibility with the natural environment, land use map consistency, rural lifestyle in the desert region and community identity as key criteria outlined in the plan that developers and county planners must abide by.

Hamburg said he detected disingenuousness in Landver’s assertion that “We don’t want to light up the dark sky. We do not want to disrupt the stillness.”

In actuality, Hamburg said, “The large, unprecedented size and footprint of the proposed resort will create disruption to the current sparsely populated rural/residential nature of Wonder Valley. The implicit 24/7 operation of a hotel resort and the currently officially undisclosed housing development will impose noise and light that is not currently present in Wonder Valley. The ‘mitigations’ in the initial study/mitigated negative declaration, particularly in regards to noise and light-shed, will not cure these impacts.”

Landver purposefully misrepresented resident’s objections to the resort compound using an overstatement comparing it to a Miami nightclub, Hamburg said.

“Using ‘Miami nightclub’ is glib, and no one concerned about the proposed development contends that to be in the offing,” Hamburg said. “But in addition to the regular in and out traffic to the proposed resort, they are advertising that the proposed inn will conduct music and other events such as weddings that will incur additional noise, light, and traffic at that site.”

Hamburg referenced Landver’s statements to the *Sentinel* acknowledging his and Greenberg’s intent to place prefabricated one-story, 2,000 square foot homes on the remaining 138.79 acres they have acquired at the corner of Amboy Road and Gammel Road, together with Landver’s prediction that the homes will be completed and ready for occupancy by 2026, stating, “None of this is disclosed in the initial study/mitigated negative declaration. Such plans are contrary to the California Environmental Quality Act statute prohibiting ‘spot zoning’

and 'piecemealing' and should be addressed by the county with a full environmental impact report."

Hamburg referenced Landver's statement to the *Sentinel* that what is to be built on the property at the corner of Amboy Road and Gammel Road "is not going to be apartments or condominiums. If it is going to be homes, it will be very sparse. This will not take away from the way of life the residents now have." Hamburg said, "Anyone visiting Wonder Valley will clearly perceive and experience that such a large, concentrated development as the proposed resort and additional housing will be anomalous to the current environment and its implementation will set a precedent for further disruptive development." With regard to Landver's contention that "The local residents do not realize that our hotel will put millions of dollars back into their community" and "They will be able [because of additional tax revenue] to bring the fire department and paramedics back," Hamburg asserted, "There is no evidence that this will be the case." He called upon Landver to document "in detail" his claim that the hotel project will reinvigorate local public safety services.

"The current state of public services re sheriff, fire, and emergency medical technicians is totally inadequate to the current needs of Wonder Valley, with the nearest fire station 10 miles away and the sheriff's station in Joshua Tree and response times for such services therefore critically problematic," Hamburg said. "The proposed inn will create increased needs for public services for the guests in the 106 rooms and other facilities and events. We are frankly skeptical that the taxes collected by the proposed inn will cure these problems anytime soon. Again, I call upon Mr. Landver to please document how this will be addressed. The XV: public services section of our 18- page comment document to the county for issues relates to fire and other public services and the potential increase in tax revenue that might contribute to enhance these. It is up to the developers and the county to substantiate in an environmental impact report that the Wonder Valley community would in fact derive benefits from Wonder Valley Inn fees paid. The initial study/ mitigated negative declaration addresses this only in a superficial manner."

Hamburg called into question the claim that Landver made in his

interview with the *Sentinel* that the local populace is more in favor of the resort project than opposed to it. "There have been over 300 people who have sent letters of support of the Wonder Valley Inn," Landver told the *Sentinel* last week. "There are as many letters saying 'We support the project' as 'We don't support the project.'"

Hamburg said, "This is highly questionable. The comments that were submitted via the stopwonderinn.org site and sent to the county number 264, and we are aware of many comments separately submitted from others concerned, including the board of the Morongo Basin Conservation Association. And it needs to be noted that Alan Greenberg, one of the proposal's principals, did put up a 'petition' on the Eko site which apparently garnered about 300 responses. We see this 'petition' as a prime example of 'astroturfing' and more as a marketing ploy. We also question the means by which signatures were gathered, as we have observed that links to it were generated via a Facebook post from Mark Landver, Jason's brother. We have no way of knowing if the signatures were organic, came from 'bots' or consist of Greenberg's and Landver's friends, family and business associates nor if the signers live in Los Angeles as we believe the developers do. It is suspicious that the large bulk of signatures were collected in about one day. Note that the 'petition' is no longer online, having been taken down the morning after the county comment deadline."

According to Hamburg, "A review of the initial study/mitigated negative declaration reveals numerous deficiencies, indicating further study is needed to adequately evaluate potential significant impacts on the Wonder Valley community, environment, and resources. Substantial evidence demonstrates that

impacts from the project are individually and cumulatively significant. The following concerns, among others, have been either not addressed or not adequately addressed in the initial study/mitigated negative declaration: aesthetics; lighting impacting dark night skies; air quality; biological resources; cultural resources; energy; geology/soils; greenhouse gas emissions; hazards and hazardous materials; hydrology/water quality; land use/planning; noise; public services, recreation and transportation. Accordingly, the county must prepare a complete, certified environmental impact report addressing these

impacts, in full compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act, before it can approve the project.”