



# Staff Report and Recommendations

## Agenda of June 27, 2022, Item 7a

### County of Ventura • Resource Management Agency

800 S. Victoria Avenue, Ventura, CA 93009-1740 • (805) 654-2478 • [www.vcrma.org/divisions/planning](http://www.vcrma.org/divisions/planning)

#### I. APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER:

**Applicant/Property Owner:** The Dudley and Anne Crawford DeZonia Family Trust  
4106 Thacher Road  
Ojai, CA 93023

#### II. REQUEST:

A request to establish a Mills Act Historical Property Contract for Ventura County Landmark No. 180 (Bella Vista Ranch) located at 4106 Thacher Road, Ojai, CA 93023. (Case No. CH21-0040).

#### III. LOCATION AND PROPERTY INFORMATION:

4106 Thacher Road, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County)  
Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 029-0-020-260  
Historic Designation: Ventura County Landmark No. 180  
Common/Historic Name: Bella Vista Ranch

The subject property consists of approximately 2.77 acres within the Rural General Plan land use designation and Rural Exclusive (RE) 5-acre Zone. The property contains a two-story, 5,374-square-foot California Bungalow farmhouse located on a rock-lined, paved driveway.

#### IV. PROJECT SCOPE:

The applicant is requesting to enter into a Mills Act Contract with the County of Ventura for the benefit of property tax savings in exchange for the continued preservation of the Bella Vista Ranch, located at 4106 Thacher Road in the unincorporated area of Ojai.

#### V. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The Bella Vista Ranch property was documented in the *2021 Historic Resources Report, Bella Vista Ranch, 1340 McNell Road/4106 Thacher Road, Ojai* ("SBRA Report") prepared by San Buenaventura Research Associates (Exhibit 2).<sup>1</sup> All substantive information regarding the characteristics, history, and significance of the property generally comes from the SBRA Report, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>1</sup> Triem, Judy and Mitch Stone, San Buenaventura Research Associates (SBRA), *Historic Resources Report, Bella Vista Ranch, 1340 McNell Road/4106 Thacher Road, Ojai*, June 18, 2021. All substantive information regarding the characteristics, history, and significance of the property generally comes from this report, unless otherwise noted.

The subject property was once part of a larger 80-acre parcel purchased by Thomas Robert McNell in 1890 from Rinaldo D. Jackson, who patented the homestead claim to these public lands. McNell was born in Belfast, Ireland on October 17, 1824 and emigrated to New York when he was seventeen years old. McNell found great financial success in New York City's hospitality business which allowed him to purchase a number of properties, including properties in the Ojai Valley, where he had wintered. McNell apparently was never a permanent or long-term resident of the Ojai Valley, but altogether he invested in over 160 acres of land in the valley to raise citrus, one portion of which was the 80 acres near McNell Road. On one of his early visits to the Ojai Valley in 1892, McNell brought along his eighteen-year-old grandson, William Hendrickson, from New York, to help manage his properties. In 1900, Hendrickson took over management of the property and soon thereafter built the residence at 4106 Thacher Road.

The Bella Vista Ranch property was found significant for its reflection of the settlement and agricultural development of the Ojai Valley as one of the more intact examples of a ranching property from its period, particularly during the latter decades of the 19th century and early 20th century (Criterion 1). Further, it is associated with the development of citrus as an important crop in the Ojai Valley (Criterion 2). Following successful efforts beginning in the 1870s to grow citrus and other orchard crops in the Ojai Valley, much of this area would be settled by homesteaders who experimented with citrus and a variety of other tree and row crops. Moreover, the residence at 4106 Thacher Road embodies the distinctive characteristics of a California Bungalow farmhouse built circa 1910 (Criterion 5). In addition, the property was found to retain most aspects of integrity.

The period of significance for the 4106 Thacher Road residence was determined to be from 1910 to 1966; this is the period where the property was occupied by descendants of the McNell family who continued to farm the property and raise citrus until alterations were made to the residence, as described below.

## **VI. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION:**

The Bella Vista Ranch property is described in the SBRA Report as a two-story, 5,374-square-foot California Bungalow farmhouse built circa 1910. In addition, the property contains a non-historic swimming pool, shed, and lath house. Other features on the property include stone retaining walls and a stone barbeque, two square stone entrance posts adjacent to the driveway to 4106 Thacher Road, citrus and avocado orchards, and additional landscape features such as mature Oak trees and other specimen trees.

According to the SBRA Report, the residence has an irregular plan and features a side-facing gable roof broken by a front intersecting gable. A long, recessed front porch is supported by a low brick wall and square wood columns and extends around the south side of the house. The porch has a beaded board ceiling and wooden floors. Under the porch eaves and along the side of the house is a decorative frieze with a raised wood design and classical detailing. The house is covered with clapboards and shingles and knee brackets are located under the eaves. Windows are multi-paned, double hung, with tapered wood molding. Interior features include wood floors and wood wainscoting, plate rails, and picture rails. Built-in, glass-fronted cabinets with square capped posts above separate the entry/foyer and the dining room. The doors throughout the house are all wood, five-paneled doors with original hardware. The large front door features three vertical narrow glass panes and three small square panes above. The upstairs features a dark, wood-carved railing at the top of the stairs. All of the three upstairs bedrooms and bathroom are covered with beaded board on portions of the ceiling and walls and the hallway features a number of built-in cabinets.

A number of known alterations have taken place at the residence. In the late 1960s, a 480-square-foot living room addition, designed by Ojai architect Chalfant Head, was constructed off the southern elevation and a covered porch to match the original in most details was built on both the front (western) and side (southern) elevations. As part of this construction, some windows were replaced and doors added to the residence. In 1972, alterations designed by Beverly Hills architect Edwin William Tell included additional alterations to the living room addition. Further, the original free-standing garage/carport was removed and a new three car garage built attached to the eastern end of the house as part of an I-shaped addition containing a breakfast nook. A small, flat-roofed storage room, now referred to as a bonus room, was also built at the southeast corner of the house prior to this time. Other major changes on the interior include the reconfiguration of bedrooms to include additional closet space and bathrooms, reconfiguration of the kitchen, and addition of a small dining area as well as rooms for storage. Further, the upstairs stairway was reconfigured three times.

In the SBRA Report, the residence's interior and exterior character-defining features are listed on page 21. In addition, the SBRA Report provides illustrative photos of interior and exterior features.

### **Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) Landmark Designation and Prior Reviews:**

At the CHB's hearing held on September 20, 2021, the CHB approved the designation of the subject property as Ventura County Landmark No. 180 and a Certificate of Appropriateness for a mix of new construction, demolition activities, interior and exterior alterations, and various site improvements to the residence.

## **VII. MILLS ACT PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS:**

The Mills Act Contract is a formal agreement between the County and the property owner for a minimum term of ten years. The contract automatically renews each year on its anniversary date and another year is added to the effective term of the contract. The contract runs (essentially in perpetuity) with the land unless non-renewed by the property owner. The contract is transferred to new owners when the property is sold and is binding on all successive owners.

### Minimum Preservation Standards

The property owners agree to restore, repair, maintain, and protect the property for the life of the contract in accordance with the specific historic preservation standards and conditions identified in the proper maintenance of the property (Exhibit 1). The submitted ten-year rehabilitation list (Exhibit 1, Contract Exhibit D) for the subject property describes the property owner's intent to restore, rehabilitate, and maintain the interior and exterior character-defining elements of the residence in accordance with the *Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.

### Inspections and Monitoring Requirements

County staff inspect Mills Act properties on an on-going basis to ensure proper maintenance is completed pursuant to the terms of the contract. The initial ten-year term is the period of time in which the rehabilitation projects should be substantially completed. Property owners are encouraged to submit an annual self-inspection report in order to update the County on their progress of rehabilitating and maintaining the property.

The authority of the Ventura County Cultural Heritage Board as it relates to Mills Act contracts is set forth in Ventura County Cultural Heritage Ordinance (CHO) 4225. Specifically, CHO Section 1364-10 allows the CHB to make recommendations regarding applications for and administration of historical property contracts (i.e. Mills Act contracts) to the Board of Supervisors. The Board of Supervisors is the final decision-making body for all contracts. The CHB may recommend modifications to the Mills Act Agreement to incorporate additional preservation or rehabilitation requirements during the ten-year Rehabilitation Plan as deemed necessary, or may vote to recommend denial of the Mills Act contract if the CHB finds that the property is not eligible. The CHB does not have the authority to revise the Mills Act contract language and incorporate new conditions, though it would be feasible to include such recommendations in their resolution to the Board of Supervisors, should the majority of CHB members agree.

It's worth noting that all future revisions to the structure, including to interior character-defining features, will require issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness from the CHB or CHB staff.

**VIII. PUBLIC COMMENTS:**

No public comment regarding this item has been received to date.

**IX. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:**

Staff is recommending the CHB take the following actions regarding the request:

1. **CONDUCT** public hearing, **RECEIVE** oral and written testimony, and **CONSIDER** the Planning Division Staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto;
2. **CERTIFY** that the Cultural Heritage Board has reviewed and considered this staff report and all exhibits hereto, and has considered all comments received during the public comment process;
3. **APPROVE** findings one through four as follows:
  1. The Dudley and Anne Crawford DeZonia Family Trust, dated September 14, 2016, possesses and owns real property located at 4106 Thacher Road, Ojai, Ventura County, California;
  2. The property is a qualified historical property that is privately owned, not exempt from property taxation and is designated as Ventura County Historical Landmark No. 180;
  3. The owner desires to carry out the relevant purposes of the California Government Code for the entire site and structures thereon; and
  4. The owner desires to limit the use of the historical property, 4106 Thacher Road, Ojai, CA 93023, to retain its characteristics as a property of historical significance; and
4. **ADOPT** a Resolution (Exhibit 3) recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve a Mills Act Historical Property Contract for the Bella Vista Ranch property.

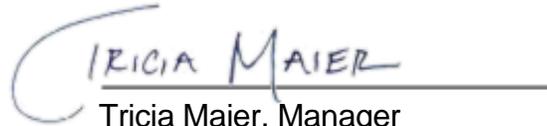
Prepared by:



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Exhibits:

Exhibit 1: Proposed Mills Act Contract

Contract Exhibit A – Legal Description

Contract Exhibit B – List of Significant Character Defining and Historic Features

Contract Exhibit C – Mills Act Minimum Standards for Maintenance, Use, and Preservation

Contract Exhibit D – Mills Act Ten-Year Rehabilitation Plan

Exhibit 2: Historic Resources Report dated June 18, 2021

Exhibit 3: CHB Resolution No. 2022-9 to the Board of Supervisors