



Staff Report and Recommendations

Agenda of July 25, 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

I. APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER:

Applicant/Property Owner: John M and Mary Cuthbert, Trustees of The Cuthbert Family Trust
76 Oak Drive
Ojai, CA 93023

II. REQUEST:

A request to establish a Mills Act Historical Property Contract for Ventura County Landmark No. 182 (Noble Oaks Estate) located at 76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023. (Case No. CH22-0007).

III. LOCATION AND PROPERTY INFORMATION:

76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County)
Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 024-0-031-150
Historic Designation: Ventura County Landmark No. 182
Common/Historic Name: Noble Oaks Estate

Zoning (split): RA-2 ac, OS-40 ac/TRU/DKS (Temporary Rental Units Overlay Zone/Ojai Valley Dark Sky Overlay Zone)
General Plan Designation (split): Agricultural, Open Space

The Noble Oaks Estate property consists of a 5.87-acre parcel containing a two-story, Spanish Colonial Revival-style main residence, attached garage, and two detached garage buildings, as well as other site improvements, including a swimming pool, solar array, landscape features, and large specimen trees. The property is characterized by steeply sloping hillsides vegetated with native oaks, smaller native trees, and plants with non-native plants near the house.

IV. PROJECT SCOPE:

The applicant is requesting to enter into a Mills Act Historical Property Contract with the County of Ventura for the benefit of property tax savings in exchange for the continued preservation of the Noble Oaks Estate, located at 76 Oak Drive in the unincorporated area of Ojai.

V. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

Property History

The Noble Oaks Estate property was documented in the September 3, 2021 *Historic Resources Report Evaluating the Eligibility of 76 Oak Drive (APN 024-0-031-150)*,

Ventura County, California For Nomination as a County of Ventura Landmark (“Historic Resources Report”) prepared by Post/Hazeltine Associates (Exhibit 2).¹ All substantive information regarding the characteristics, history, and significance of the property generally comes from the Historic Resources Report, unless otherwise noted.

The main residence, completed in 1928, was designed by architect Harold E. Burkett for John and Constance Burnham. At the time, the residence was known as Burnham Hill. John Burnham (1895-1952), originally from New York, found success in the Santa Barbara real estate market in the early 1920s. In 1926, Burnham purchased 60 acres in the Ojai Valley adjacent to the Ojai Inn and Country Club and developed the land as a residential subdivision. Burnham engaged the services of his friend, architect Harold E. Burkett, as well as that of Austen Pierpont in planning the new subdivision, called the Country Club Estates, and approving the architectural plans submitted by prospective buyers.

During World War II, Burkett worked as an architect for the Navy, helping to design the Port Hueneme Military Base. During his career, his practice varied from commercial, ecclesiastical, and institutional projects to residential commissions. Among his most notable non-residential commissions were the Ventura High School Auditorium, the Ventura City/County Library, the Community Presbyterian Church, Our Lady of Assumption Church in Ventura, and the design of the jail annex to the Ventura County Government Center. Other commissions included the W.P. Daily house in Camarillo, the Baptist Church in Camarillo, and the Firestone building in Ventura. Like many architects of the era, Burkett practiced in a range of styles, including Art Deco, Streamline Moderne, and Period Revival.

The Burnham’s and their children lived in the residence for only two years before moving to the nearby Arbolada housing tract, developed by Edward Libby in the early 1920s. As a result of the Great Depression, the Burnham’s were forced to sell Burnham Hill in 1931. Lawrence and Alta Diedrich, who had found success in the Oxnard automotive parts business, purchased the property and renamed it to Casa Don Alta La Mar. The Diedrich’s retained the services of Harold Burkett and made several alterations to the residence to accommodate their family. In addition, they increased the size of the property by another approximately four acres by adding an undeveloped parcel adjacent to the former Burnham property. This additional parcel was developed as the L. N. Diedrich BBQ Park as a private recreational area for the family and included a two-bedroom cabin, a “chuckwagon” style kitchen building, two barbeque pits, picnic tables, as well as shuffleboard and badminton courts. Lawrence Diedrich lived in the house for only four years before his death in 1935. Alta Diedrich

¹ Post, Pamela, Ph.D. and Timothy Hazeltine, Post/Hazeltine Associates, *Historic Resources Report Evaluating the Eligibility of 76 Oak Drive (APN 024-0-031-150), Ventura County, California For Nomination as a County of Ventura Landmark*, September 3, 2021. All substantive information regarding the characteristics, history, and significance of the property generally comes from this report, unless otherwise noted.

owned the property until 1943 before selling Casa Don Alta a Mar to Laura Wells Noble.

In 1943, Laura Noble, along with her two unmarried daughters, Lorraine and Grace, purchased the property and renamed it to Noble Oaks. Laura's husband, Frederick Noble, had been a farmer and ranch operator on the Oxnard Plain before his death in 1941. Laura Noble died in 1958 and her two daughters continued to live at Noble Oaks until their deaths in 1988. During the ownership of Noble Oaks by Laura Wells and her daughters, there appear to have been no major modifications or alterations to the house. In 1991, the property was purchased by Hollywood film director Tim Burton, known for his critically acclaimed "gothic"-inspired fantasy and horror films, including *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993). Burton set about to restore and renovate the main house, which had badly deteriorated. Burton owned the property until 1998 when it was purchased by Michael Greynald, a contractor, and his wife, Nicole Strauss. Greynald and Strauss owned the property only for a year before selling the property to its current owners, John and Mary Cuthbert. The Cuthberts, who have owned the property since 1999, continued the restoration of Noble Oaks first initiated by Tim Burton.

Significance Evaluation

The main residence at Noble Oaks Estate is significant for its reflection of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style, a popular style amongst the middle, upper middle, and wealthy classes in southern California in the early 20th century, as well as those design elements that exhibit the skilled, handcrafted workmanship typical of the time period.

Further, the property is significant for its association with John Burnham, an important figure in the early residential development of the Ojai Valley. As one of the first developers of a planned, residential subdivision, Country Club Estates, in 1926, Burnham along with another visionary, Edward Libby, helped to cultivate the suburban development of Ojai Valley.

Moreover, the property is significant for its representation of the work of Harold E. Burkett, a master architect who contributed significantly to the architectural heritage of southern California, and in particular, the County of Ventura. His career spanned over four decades and produced a number of noteworthy residential and non-residential commissions, including designs for civic, institutional, and ecclesiastical buildings.

In addition, the property retains sufficient integrity to convey its association with the Burnham family and exemplifies the architectural contributions of Harold Burkett to the architectural heritage of Ventura County. The main residence is an almost intact exemplar of a Spanish Colonial Revival Style house designed for the consumption of the upper middle class. The house remains in its original location and continues to

retain almost all of its original construction materials, including siding, fenestration, and roof cladding, as well as those design elements that exhibit the skilled, handcrafted workmanship typical of the time period.

The following buildings, structures, and landscape features were identified as contributors to the historic significance of the property:

- Main Residence;
- Sandstone retaining walls, parapets, steps, barbeque, and ornamental water feature, located off the south side of the house, as well as the plastered wall and entrance court off the north side of the house;
- Entrance court and its hardscape features, including a bedrock mortar and native oak tree; and
- Overall pattern of the surrounding landscape composed of trees and open space.

VI. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION:

The Noble Oaks Estate property consists of the following structures and features:

- A two-story Spanish Colonial Revival-style main residence (built in 1928) with attached garage;
- Two detached garage buildings (one built circa 1928 and one built circa-1990s);
- Hardscape and landscape features, including sandstone retaining walls and a water feature off the house's south elevation, large specimen trees, and informal landscaping; and
- Other non-historic features, including a swimming pool, solar array, wall along the east property line, and a vineyard.

According to the Historic Resources Report (Exhibit 2), a number of known alterations have taken place at the residence. These exterior and interior alterations are described on page 20 of Exhibit 2. In Exhibit 2, the residence's interior and exterior character-defining features are listed on page 28. In addition, Exhibit 2 provides illustrative photos of interior and exterior features.

Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) Landmark Designation:

At the CHB's hearing held on September 20, 2021, the CHB approved the designation of the subject property as Ventura County Landmark No. 182.

VII. MILLS ACT PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS:

The Mills Act Historical Property Contract (“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 or County. 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*. Rehabilitation work and related investment already completed by the property owner is described in Exhibit 3.

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 Contract to incorporate additional preservation or rehabilitation requirements during the ten-year Rehabilitation Plan as deemed necessary, or may vote to recommend denial of the Contract if the CHB finds that the property is not eligible. The CHB does not have the authority to revise the 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 alterations 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. John M and Mary Cuthbert, Trustees of The Cuthbert Family Trust, possess and own real property located at 76 Oak Drive, Ojai, Ventura County, California;
 2. The property is a qualified historical property pursuant to Section 50280.1 of the California Government Code that is privately owned, not exempt from property taxation and is designated as Ventura County Historical Landmark No. 182;
 3. The owner desires to carry out the relevant purposes of the California Government Code commencing with Section 50280 for the entire site and structures thereon; and
 4. The owner desires to limit the use of the historical property, 76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023, to retain its characteristics as a property of historical significance; and
4. **ADOPT** a Resolution (Exhibit 4) recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve the proposed Mills Act Historical Property Contract for the Noble Oaks Estate property (Exhibit 1).

Prepared by:



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Reviewed by:



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Exhibits:

- Exhibit 1: Proposed Mills Act Historical Property 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 September 3, 2021
- Exhibit 3: Previous Rehabilitation Work Completed at Noble Oaks Estate
- Exhibit 4: CHB Resolution No. 2022-11 to the Board of Supervisors