



Staff Report and Recommendations Agenda of October 9, 2023, Item 6b

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: County of Ventura
Resource Management Agency, Planning Division
800 S Victoria Avenue, #1740
Ventura, CA 93009

Property Owner: Glenn Shephard, Director
County of Ventura
Watershed Protection District
800 S Victoria Avenue, #1600
Ventura, CA 93009

II. REQUEST:

A request to downgrade the Matilija Hot Springs property from a Ventura County Landmark to Ventura County Point of Interest No. 14. The site address is 786 and 788 West Matilija Canyon Road, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County) and Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs) 010-0-180-420, 010-0-180-430, 010-0-180-440, 010-0-180-450, and 010-0-180-510. (Case No. CH23-0036).

III. LOCATION AND PROPERTY INFORMATION:

Location: 786 and 788 West Matilija Canyon Road, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County)

Common Name: Ventura County Landmark #25 - Matilija Hot Springs

Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs): 010-0-180-420, 010-0-180-430, 010-0-180-440, 010-0-180-450, and 010-0-180-510

Matilija Hot Springs is a 9.22-acre property and the historical site of a mineral hot springs resort. Originally called the Ojai Hot Springs Resort, the Matilija Hot Springs health spa and recreation resort was founded January 20, 1887 by Abram W. Blumberg on the former site of a popular campsite for bear hunters. The entire site, including buildings and structures, the hot water springs, a cold-water spring, and easements thereto—is presently listed as Ventura County Landmark #25. Buildings and structures at Matilija Hot Springs were destroyed in the December 2017 Thomas fire and subsequently demolished by the County of Ventura Watershed Protection District.

IV. PROJECT SCOPE:

Ventura County Cultural Heritage Ordinance No. 4604 (Ordinance) Section 1366 provides for the designation of Cultural Heritage Sites by the Cultural Heritage Board where the property owner has no objection to a site's designation. Pursuant to

Ordinance Section 1368, a Ventura County Landmark may be downgraded where there is evidence that the property has been defaced, demolished, added to, altered, or moved, or damaged by natural disaster, including but not limited to, earthquake, fire, or flood, and the Cultural Heritage Board determines that the site's integrity has been impacted, through no fault or neglect of the property owner, to the extent that it no longer meets the criteria for a Cultural Heritage Site. An application for the removal or downgrade of the designation of a Cultural Heritage Site may be filed by its property owner, by the County Resource Management Agency, or directly by the Cultural Heritage Board or a member of the Cultural Heritage Board if approved by a properly carried motion.

The Cultural Heritage Board previously directed Ventura County Planning Division staff to evaluate the designation status of Cultural Heritage Sites within unincorporated areas that no longer exist or do not meet established integrity standards. In July 2023, staff conducted a comprehensive review of Ventura County Landmarks to determine sites potentially eligible to be downgraded due to demolition. The subject property is one of three properties in the unincorporated Ventura County that is being brought forward for consideration to be downgraded. The County of Ventura's proposed action on this item is based on available information that the property no longer appears to meet the criteria for a Ventura County Landmark.

V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE:

A Historic Resources Assessment (Exhibit 1) was previously prepared for the property by Pamela J. Huckins, PhD in November 2012 ("Historical Assessment"). The following excerpt is from the Historical Assessment:

Matilija Hot Springs was one of California's famous mineral springs resorts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The facility was primarily known for its healing waters, which were touted in publications and periodicals from coast to coast. So popular was the resort with out-of-town visitors that by the second full season of operation, in 1889, a Federal Post Office was established on the site. A stone building was constructed in 1902 to house this federal office. Ultimately, the Matilija Hot Springs health spa and recreation resort was equally famous for its grand, indoor, heated sulphur/mineral plunge (built 1902), fertile fishing and hunting grounds, luxurious accommodations, and exquisite cuisine served in a dining facility with white linen and sterling service.

The Post Office building was the oldest structure on the site and found significant in its own right. The Historical Assessment notes that the Post Office was significant at the local and national levels due to the fact that it was a federal, nationally-advertised post office. The following is excerpted from the Historical Assessment:

[The Matilija Hot Springs Post Office] represents a local manifestation of the federal presence at the Matilija Hot Springs Health Spa and Recreation Resort. The Matilija

Hot Springs Post Office epitomized the communication system of rural communities with the whole nation. Also, under County Criterion A, the Post Office/store/snack bar is locally significant for its architectural value. It was built in 1902 during the Creasinger phase of improvements specifically to house the federal Post Office. The Post Office/store/snack bar is an example of turn-of-the-century vernacular architecture created using locally-quarried sandstone. The Post Office/store/snack bar was specifically identified in the 1972 County of Ventura Historic Landmark nomination.

In addition, again under National Criterion A/State Criterion A/County Criterion B, the Post Office/store/snack bar is significant for its role as the center of communication and supplies during the years Matilija Hot Springs operated as a health spa and recreation resort. Thus, the Post Office/store/snack bar is linked to the nationwide popularity of mineral hot springs as places for recreation and restoration of health in the early 20th century. The federal Post Office at the Matilija Hot Springs, established in 1889, pre-dates the Ventura County post offices of Camarillo, Moorpark, Oak View, Oxnard, Somis, Lyon Springs, and Wheeler Springs (the latter two locations also in the Matilija Canyon).

The period of significance for the former buildings on site ranged from circa 1887 until 1972. There were eight contributing structures, consisting of the following: Bathhouse, Historic Cabin, Restroom Cottage, Guest Cottage, Post Office, Swimming Pool, Pool House and Residence. During the December 2017 Thomas fire, most of these buildings were destroyed. The Post Office building also suffered majored losses from the fire, but its four walls made of local sandstone remained. On March 25, 2019, the Cultural Heritage Board denied the Property Owner’s request for a Certificate of Appropriateness to demolish the remaining buildings and remove debris. After expiration of the required waiting period following denial of a Certificate of Appropriateness, the Property Owner demolished the remaining structures in 2019.

VI. POINT OF INTEREST CRITERIA:

In order to be designated a Point of Interest, Section 1367 of the Cultural Heritage Ordinance establishes that Points of Interest satisfy one of the following criteria:

- (1) The site of a building, structure or object that no longer exists, but was associated with historic events, important persons, or embodied a distinctive character or architectural style; or
- (2) A site that has historical significance, but has been altered to the extent that the integrity of the original workmanship, materials, or style has been substantially compromised; or

- (3) The site of a historic event which has no distinguishable characteristics other than that a historic event occurred at that site, and the site is not of sufficient historical significance to justify the establishment of a Landmark.

VII. STAFF CONCLUSIONS:

Based on the previous demolition of the buildings and structures on site, in combination with the evidence provided in the Historical Assessment, staff supports making the findings under CHO §1367(c) that the property is eligible for downgrade as a Ventura County Landmark and designation as a Ventura County Point of Interest. In addition, the evidence provided in the Historic Report supports making the additional designation findings in Ordinance §1367-1 as the site has historic character, value, and interest to the general public, there are no foreseeable costs to the County in designating the subject property as a Ventura County Point of Interest, and the designation shall not infringe upon the rights of the Property Owner as the designation does not affect allowable land uses and the Property Owner consents to this designation. Therefore, Cultural Heritage Board staff recommends that your board approve the request for the downgrading of this site and designation as a Ventura County Point of Interest designation.

VIII. HEARING NOTICE AND PUBLIC COMMENTS:

A notification letter regarding the proposed downgrade was sent by U.S. mail to the Property Owner on July 28, 2023 (Exhibit 2) and signed by Glenn Shephard, Director of the County of Ventura Watershed Protection District, indicating his consent to the proposed action. A public notice was sent by U.S. mail to the Property Owner of the subject property not less than fifteen days prior to the date of this hearing (Exhibit 3). No public comment regarding this item has been received to date.

IX. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

Cultural Heritage Board staff recommends that your board take the following actions regarding this item:

1. **CONDUCT** public hearing, **RECEIVE** oral and written testimony, and **CONSIDER** the Planning Division staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto;
2. **FIND** that, in accordance with Ordinance §1366-2 and §1368, the Property Owner was given a 15-day notice of the Cultural Heritage Board's hearing regarding the proposed downgrade of the Matilija Hot Springs property from a Ventura County Landmark to Ventura County Point of Interest No. 14, and placement of said designation in County lists;

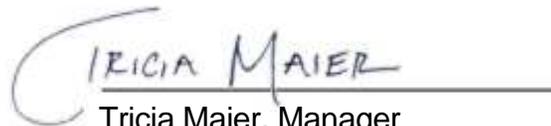
3. **FIND** that the Matilija Hot Springs property meets County Point of Interest Criterion 1 as required by Ordinance §1367(c), and the additional standards required by Ordinance §1367-1 based on the substantial evidence in the staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto; and
4. **ADOPT** Cultural Heritage Board Resolution No. 2023-4 (Exhibit 4) approving the downgrade of the Matilija Hot Springs property located at 786 and 788 West Matilija Canyon Road, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County) from a Ventura County Landmark to Ventura County Point of Interest No. 14.

Prepared by:



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Reviewed by:



Tricia Maier, Manager
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Exhibits:

- Exhibit 1: Historical Resources Assessment, dated November 2012
- Exhibit 2: Property Owner Notification Letter
- Exhibit 3: 15-Day Public Hearing Notice
- Exhibit 4: Cultural Heritage Board Resolution No. 2023-4