



# Staff Report and Recommendations Agenda of March 25, 2024, Item 6b

## 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:** Bell Canyon Equestrian Center  
Ashley Forchelli, President  
30 Hackamore Lane #8  
Bell Canyon, CA 91307

**Property Owner:** Bell Canyon Equestrian Center  
30 Hackamore Lane #8  
Bell Canyon, CA 91307

### II. REQUEST:

Provide a recommendation to the State Office of Historic Preservation on whether the Bell Canyon Equestrian Center meets the criteria for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.

### III. LOCATION AND PROPERTY INFORMATION:

Location: 29 Baymare Road, Bell Canyon, CA 91307 (District 4 – Parvin)  
Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 850-0-111-095  
Historic Designation: undesignated  
Common/Historic Name: Bell Canyon Equestrian Center

The Bell Canyon Equestrian Center is located on an approximately 10-acre parcel in the unincorporated gated residential community of Bell Canyon in southeastern Ventura County. It is surrounded by natural open space and single-family houses and accessed through the City of Los Angeles community of West Hills and the western San Fernando Valley. Altogether, the equestrian center consists of five contributing buildings (one Main Building and four Stable Barns), one contributing structure (Main Arena), one contributing site (Landscaped Courtyard), and five non-contributing structures.<sup>1</sup>

### IV. BACKGROUND AND REGULATORY CONTEXT:

#### A. Request for Comment by the State of California Office of State Historic Preservation (OHP) from the Cultural Heritage Board

On March 4, 2024, the County of Ventura (County) received a request from the OHP for the Ventura County Cultural Heritage Board ("Board" or "CHB"), which is the

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<sup>1</sup> Nuval, Alvin-Christian & Robert Jay Chattel, AIA (November 2023). "Bell Canyon Equestrian Center." National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form. Chattel, Inc, Sherman Oaks, CA.

County's local historic preservation commission, to comment on whether the Bell Canyon Equestrian Center (Equestrian Center) meets the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places (National Register) under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), following its nomination to be listed in the National Register (Exhibit 1) ("OHP Request"). OHP made the request pursuant to the Certified Local Government (CLG) Agreement between the State of California (State) and the County (Exhibit 2). According to the OHP Request, the nomination will be reviewed by the State Historical Resources Commission at their May 3, 2024 hearing.

## **B. Regulatory Context**

This OHP request comes to the Cultural Heritage Board as one of several responsibilities the County meets as a participant in the CLG Program. Participants in the CLG program must meet five basic CLG program requirements: 1) to enforce local and state standards for the designation and protection of historic resources; 2) to establish an adequate and qualified local historic preservation board; 3) to maintain a system for the survey and inventory of historic properties; 4) to provide for adequate public participation in local historic preservation programs, *"including the process of recommending properties for nomination to the National Register"*; and 5) to satisfactorily perform the responsibilities designated to the local board by the State (See NHPA, § 101(c)(1)).<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The County's Participation in the CLG Program

The County adopted its first Cultural Heritage Ordinance in 1968 with the stated purpose of "preserving and protecting landmarks and points of interest . . . [that] hav[e] a specific historical or aesthetic character or interest." The Ordinance has been amended several times since it was originally enacted, including in 1991 when the County amended the Ordinance to meet the five basic CLG program requirements after consulting with OHP.

In 1992, the County entered an agreement with the State to become a certified participant in the CLG program (Exhibit 2). The Ordinance, as amended in 1991, was incorporated into the CLG Agreement together with mandatory CLG program procedures then in effect. The current version of the Ordinance was pre-approved by OHP, as required by the CLG Agreement, and adopted by the County in 2022. The current CLG program procedures (CLG Procedures) were adopted by OHP in 2010.

The CLG Procedures obligate the County to provide for adequate public participation in all CLG programs and activities and to participate in the nomination of properties to the National Register pursuant to Section 101(c)(2)(A) of the National Historic

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<sup>2</sup> See also 54 United States Code, section 302503.

Preservation Act.<sup>3</sup> Section 101(c)(2)(A) of the National Historic Preservation Act provides that the CHB, “after reasonable opportunity for public comment, shall prepare a report as to whether or not such property, in its opinion, meets the criteria of the National Register.” The criteria of the National Register are outlined in the National Register Bulletin publication, “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” (Exhibit 3).<sup>4</sup>

Concurrent with federal and state requirements, the Ordinance promotes the economic and general welfare of the County by preserving and promoting public and private historic, cultural and natural resources which are of special historical or aesthetic character or interest, or relocating or recreating such resources where necessary for their preservation and for their use, education, and view by the public (§ 1361).

Section 1365 of the Ordinance establishes the functions and powers of the Cultural Heritage Board (CHB), to which the CHB is required to adhere:

Section 1365-2: “Forward Recommendations. The Cultural Heritage Board shall make recommendations to policy makers and related staff members on issues related to the preservation and enhancement of cultural, historic, and natural features in unincorporated Ventura County as well as its cities, pursuant to any adopted contract for cultural heritage services with the County.”

## **V. NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION:**

The criteria of the National Register may be found in the National Register Bulletin publication, “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” (Exhibit 3, pg. 11).<sup>5</sup> As detailed therein, the basis for judging a property's significance and, ultimately, its eligibility under the National Register Criteria, is historic context. The use of historic context allows a property to be evaluated in any number of capacities in order to determine whether the characteristics or associations of the property are significant (Exhibit 3). After identifying the relevant historic context(s) with which the property is associated, the four National Register Criteria are applied to the property. Within the scope of the historic context, the National Register Criteria define the kind of significance that the properties represent. National Register Criteria recognize different types of values embodied in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects (Exhibit 3). These values fall into the following categories:

- Associative value (Criteria A and B): Properties significant for their association or linkage to events (Criterion A) or persons (Criterion B) important in the past;

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<sup>3</sup> See also 54 United States Code, section 302504 (b).

<sup>4</sup> See also 36 Code of Federal Regulations, section 60.4.

<sup>5</sup> See also 36 Code of Federal Regulations § 60.4.

- Design or Construction value (Criterion C): Properties significant as representatives of the manmade expression of culture or technology; and
- Information value (Criterion D): Properties significant for their ability to yield important information about prehistory or history.

The relevant National Register Criteria identified in the nomination are detailed below together with staff's corresponding and interlineated evaluation of whether the property satisfies the National Register Criteria. Information for this evaluation is sourced from the evidence provided in the nomination and based on the additional source material cited therein.

- National Register Criterion A – *Properties can be eligible for the National Register if they are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.*

#### Discussion:

According to the nomination, the Bell Canyon Equestrian Center is eligible for listing in the National Register at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the areas of Community Planning and Development and Entertainment/Recreation for its association with the development of the unincorporated private residential community of Bell Canyon and the broader pattern of equestrian communities in southern California.<sup>6</sup> The equestrian center was constructed as the focal point of a new equestrian community known originally as Woodland Hills Country Estates (later renamed Bell Canyon) and was celebrated in national publications for its design and facilities for use by horse owners seeking a respite from living in the city. The period of significance is 1968, the year of construction, to 1971, when ownership of the equestrian center officially transferred from the developer to the homeowner association.<sup>7</sup>

At the forefront of the marketing for the Woodland Hills Country Estates subdivision was its position as an equestrian community where "the horse, the horse owner and the rider will have the best of everything."<sup>8</sup> Other southern California equestrian communities had already developed in Rolling Hills, Hidden Hills Estates, Rancho California, Diamond Bar Equestrian Estates, Rolling Hills Estates, Shadow Hills, and Flintridge, with Western Horseman magazine noting that "not all, but most of this work [on horse-oriented communities] has been thought-out, planned, and done in California."<sup>9</sup> Residents at Woodland Hills Country Estates would be permitted to keep

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<sup>6</sup> Nuval, Alvin-Christian & Robert Jay Chattel, AIA (November 2023). " Bell Canyon Equestrian Center." National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form. Chattel, Inc, Sherman Oaks, CA.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

three horses per half acre of property and could take advantage of 35 miles of bridle trails as well as an equestrian center designed by Cliff May in 1968.

A 1978 newsletter from the Bell Canyon Association reported that there were 80 homes under construction, 130 occupied, and 40 for sale.<sup>10</sup> That number had risen to 553 homes in 1996 with nearly three-quarters of the lots developed. As of the 2020 United States Census and 2021 American Community Survey, Bell Canyon is home to 1,946 people in 553 households. The equestrian center continues in operation today.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the above, the property appears to be substantially associated with development of the unincorporated private residential community of Bell Canyon and the broader pattern of equestrian communities in southern California and thus likely to meet the criteria for listing in the National Register under Criterion A. Moreover, the property retains all aspects of integrity.

- National Register Criterion C – *Properties can be eligible for the National Register if they embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values, or represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.*

Discussion:

According to the nomination, the Bell Canyon Equestrian Center is eligible for listing in the National Register at the local level of significance under Criterion C in the area of Architecture as a prominent example of the California Ranch architectural style by designer Cliff May.<sup>12</sup> Highly celebrated for his California Ranch (Ranch) architectural style, Cliff May (May) was a designer who developed thousands of custom homes in southern California and around the world with no formal architectural training.<sup>13</sup> Born on August 29, 1908, May was a sixth-generation Californian who was fiercely proud of a heritage that included a great grandfather, Jose Maria Estudillo, who was the last mayor of San Diego under Mexican rule. He had been raised on a ranch that would later become part of Camp Pendleton in San Diego County, likely influencing the style for which May would be best known, described as "a marriage of the Hispanic style and Yankee ingenuity that was part of May's heritage."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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Though May did not invent the Ranch style, with several prominent Los Angeles architects like Gerald Colcord and Paul R. Williams also incorporating the style in their works, he “developed his own distinctive aesthetic that was characterized by open and free-flowing interior plans, blending of interior and exterior spaces, and hand-hewn character that loosely resembled the haciendas of early California.”<sup>15</sup> May “combined the informal layout of the California adobe courtyard home with the practical and affordable materials of the board-and-batten bungalow.”<sup>16</sup> He also “fused elements of the Spanish Revival style with Modernism to produce low-slung, horizontally oriented, pitched-roof ranch houses” with an “open, relaxed layout [emphasizing] outdoor living, perfect for the casual lifestyle and temperate climate of Southern California.”<sup>17</sup>

The Ranch style began to fall out of favor in the 1970s as buildable land became scarcer due to the rapid pace of Post-War development. May would die at his Brentwood office on October 18, 1989, after a 57-year career in which he “designed about 1,000 custom homes and produced plans that were used in the development of an estimated 18,000 other houses and numerous subdivisions across the United States and in other countries.”<sup>18</sup> May continues to be celebrated for his work as the preeminent practitioner of the Ranch style. Following May's death, the Los Angeles Times noted that “arguably no other home designer who has ever practiced in Southern California was more sensitive to the region's unique climate, evolving lifestyles and rich architectural history than Cliff May.”<sup>19</sup>

Based on the above, the property appears to be a prominent example of the California Ranch architectural style by designer Cliff May, known to the Cultural Heritage Board as a master architect, and thus likely to meet the criteria for listing in the National Register under Criterion C. Moreover, the property retains all aspects of integrity.

## **VI. STAFF CONCLUSION:**

In accordance with Section 101(c)(2)(A) of the National Historic Preservation Act and the CLG Agreement and Procedures, the CHB “shall prepare a report as to whether or not” the property, in the opinion of the CHB, “meets the criteria of the National Register.” Staff concurs with the nomination that sufficient evidence and information exist to warrant the listing of the property in the National Register. Specifically, the evidence demonstrates that the property meets Criterion A for its association with development of the unincorporated private residential community of Bell Canyon and the broader pattern of equestrian communities in southern California. In addition, the

evidence demonstrates that the property meets Criterion C as a prominent example of the California Ranch architectural style by designer Cliff May, known to the Cultural Heritage Board as a master architect. Moreover, the property retains all aspects of integrity.

Therefore, consistent with the recommended actions identified below, staff recommends that the CHB find that the property meets the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places and direct staff to transmit the CHB recommendations and findings to the OHP in advance of the May 3, 2024, State Historical Resources Commission hearing on this nomination.

**VII. PUBLIC COMMENTS:**


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

**VIII. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:**

CHB staff recommends 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. Based on the preceding evidence and analysis, **ADOPT** staff's recommendation that the property meets the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places, along with any other Cultural Heritage Board recommendations; and
3. **DIRECT** staff to **TRANSMIT** the Cultural Heritage Board recommendations and findings to the California State Office of Historic Preservation in advance of the May 3, 2024 State Historical Resources Commission hearing on this nomination.

Prepared by:



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Reviewed by:



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Exhibits:

- Exhibit 1: National Register of Historic Places Nomination for Bell Canyon Equestrian Center
- Exhibit 2: Certified Local Government Agreement between the State of California and the County of Ventura
- Exhibit 3: National Register Bulletin, Criteria for Evaluation