

# Mountain News

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The Voice of Crestline, Lake Arrowhead and Running Springs

January 16, 2020

## Preservation or Development *County's Final Decision*

On Jan. 23 at 9 a.m. the County of San Bernardino Planning Commission will decide whether or not to approve the Church of the Woods Project for development. Mountain residents may attend the hearing in

This forested land is a 27.12-acre parcel owned by the Church of the Woods, a Christian church with an estimated congregation of 300 to 350 people, said its Pastor Rod Akins. Since 2003 the church has attempt-



the Covington Chambers at 385 N. Arrowhead Avenue in San Bernardino. A live video feed of the hearing will be available at Twin Peaks Government Center located at 26010 State Highway 189 in Twin Peaks.

### The Site

It's 8:11 a.m. on Sunday, Jan 12. A coyote moves up a hill in Rimforest and emerges at the opening of the woods. It trots past a white cross erected near the dirt path leading to the edge of Highway 18. Looking like it might cross the road, the coyote stops. A car traveling eastbound rushes past. The coyote turns and retreats back in the direction it came, into the forest.

ed to construct a campus on this property, but has been met with constant resistance from portions of the community. Years of continued persistence from each side has generated controversy over this development project.

Church leaders, including Akins, have been scrutinized for their plan to level 13.6 acres of wildlife and ultimately impact an estimated 16.9 acres during the construction of the campus, according to the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR). The church has faced opposition from environmental groups such as the Save Our Forest Association, The San Bernardino Mountains Sierra Club and residents from Crestline



Pastor Rod Akins gives a Sunday morning sermon at the Church of the Woods.

to Big Bear.

Thus far, opposition has kept the project grounded in its planning stages and putting pressure on the Church to partake in the County of San Bernardino's regulatory planning process.

According to Pat Hopkins, a member of the church and advisor of the Church of the Woods Project, the process has cost the Church upwards of \$1 million — and that's excluding the purchase of the land.

So what exactly has the church spent this money on? The answer is environmental consultants and the surveys these firms conduct, all with the hope that their findings will satisfy the state and county requirements in the FEIR. The environmental review process began in 2003, but on Jan.10, 2020, the FEIR was released. In it are the survey findings deemed to be most important by regulatory bodies and the mitigation measures that the Church and its contractors must follow, should the project be approved by the County of San Bernardino Planning Commission. Leaders from the church said they feel confident with the thoroughness of the FEIR and the diligence of the county-approved consultants who they hired to collect the data. They and their congregation said they are eager to present residents with a safe and centralized communal campus venue — one where kids can hang out and people build com-

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# PROJECT

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community. But those hoping to keep the property untouched and the habitat intact find the FEIR to be a document riddled with disingenuous findings and dangerously vague details based on an amorphous regulatory framework. They fear that without more accurate surveying, the impact of erosion in Daley Canyon, potentially toxic water runoff beginning at the headwaters of Little Bear Creek and irreversible wildlife destruction and riparian habitat decimation will cause profound damage and yield unintended consequences to the mountain communities. Some members of the church said the price tag alone is reason enough to believe that now is the time to build their new facilities and finally bring their project to fruition.

## Church of the Woods

At the corner of Calgary Drive and North Bay Road, a sign reads “Church of the Woods” with an ar-

smiles, greets the congregation, and instructs everybody to walk around the room and introduce themselves to each other. They do with a series of handshakes and pleasantries. When the group finishes, the congregation returns to their original seats and a prayer is said. “I want to ask you to be in prayer for our Jan. 23 meeting with the planning commission,” Akins says to the room. He is speaking about the hearing for the FEIR when the Planning Commission will announce its decision on whether or not to approve the Church of the Woods Project. There’s a “Wooh!” from a member of the audience. “If God wants this to happen it’s going to happen, if he doesn’t we don’t want any part of it,” says Akins. “This is going to be a great campus of influence to provide needs on the mountain that aren’t being provided in other areas.”

## Faith in the Process

The FEIR details the scope of the Church of the Woods Project and outlines any mitigation measures

beat,” he said. “We want to minister to [organizations] like Operation Provider right there in Rimforest. We would probably allow them to utilize our facility to minister to people in need.” Additionally, Akins believes the church will provide a safe space for youth to relax and have fun — the type of space he feels is lacking in the mountain communities. Members from the Church of the Woods congregation shared the Pastor’s sentiment. “I’m in favor of it because as a mom on the mountain my kids participated in pretty much all the sports — soccer, baseball and basketball. I helped coach soccer and every time it was a battle for a field,” said Teresa Alexander, a youth group leader. “One of the major things this development is going to do is give fields to the community.” Her understanding was the fields would be open to anybody, from the Church of the Woods congregation or otherwise — with no fee. “This will be another place for the kids to hang out. But also we’ll be able to do services there, too,” Alexander said.

## Freedom of Private Property

While the church and its members said the new campus will be a safe facility for kids to have fun, those wanting to preserve the natural habitat and wildlife question the location and size of the campus. When asked about the motivation behind having the church on Highway 18, Akins affirmed that a portion of the motivation was to bolster the congregation’s numbers. But having the new church campus along Highway 18, means Church of the Woods is more centrally located than in its current building. Currently, the Church of the Woods congregation has between 300 and 350 members, according to Akins. However, sixteen years ago, when the Church of the Woods Project began, the congregation was larger. “The (population) on the mountain has dropped and so has the attendance. We’ve had numerous families move off the mountain or out of state,” Akins said. Church elder, George Stalzer echoed the pastor’s sentiment.

“I think it’s going to be good for the community because of its location and its ability to serve the mountain a lot better than from this location here,” said Stalzer. Though he did not know what the activity schedule would be like, George said he was certain the church would be open to anybody who wants to use the campus. When asked, why the church has to be the size and in the location it is knowing that it will disrupt the to provide the spiritual message. “Well, first of all, did you know in the San Bernardino National Forest there is 677,982 acres?” Akins responded. “That’s the National Forest in the San Bernardino Mountains. We have 15, privately-owned acres. Don’t you think property rights are still valid? We should be able to develop a campus to minister with, with our own property.” Alexander replied, citing the steps the ministry had taken to protect the environment. “There was an environment report done and it showed that it’s not going to disrupt the environment—that the animals and all of it is going to be just fine,” said Alexander. When asked where the animals will go to stay safe Alexander answered, “There’s still going to be a lot of forest all around us because we gave up the land to the county.”

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Coyote on the Church of the Woods property in Rimforest

row pointing uphill. Multi-level residential properties line Calgary Drive. Many of their driveways are level with the road. Some homes are positioned downslope, while others are partially obscured by tree cover. The street curves and dips before coming to a parking lot. The church building is situated towards the back of the lot. Near the entrance to the church, congregation members talk and laugh. At 11 a.m. the last of the congregation filters into the building — greeted at the door by members distributing the service’s program and a collection envelope. Church hymns resonate from the inside the hall where a band plays on stage. The walls of the room have painted quotes from bible passages. Either side of the stage has screens where lyrics are displayed. Music notes reverberate through the church. Members sway to the music, others close their eyes and sing the words. A man, his eyes closed, raises his arm, extending it toward the stage. Another couple embraces, arms wrapped around each other’s backs in a side hug. The service is mostly full. After the band finishes, Akins walks onto stage, a microphone-headpiece curled around his ear. He

that are necessary during development. According to the report, the church campus will include a two-story building consisting of a 27,364 sq.ft gymnasium and 41,037 square foot assembly building/children’s ministry, a 1,500 square foot two-story maintenance building, caretaker residence and lavatory facilities and a 54,000 square foot ft. sports field, sports courts and children’s play areas. Additionally, a 311-space parking lot will be paved. If approved, the church campus will rest on 13.6 of the 27.12 acres of land. Though, under the plan’s section “Construction Details” it states “...the Project would disturb approximately 16.9 acres as a result of grading...” Church of the Woods members and leaders have voiced their excitement about ministering to the community. Akins said the ultimate goal of Church of the Woods is to help minister to people spiritually. But he said, in order to reach someone spiritually, it may mean helping with his or her physical, emotional, relational and financial needs. The campus will help them accomplish this type of outreach. “We’re a church made up of community people who want to serve the community — that’s the heart-

# COMMUNITY MEETING Regarding the CHURCH OF THE WOODS PROPOSED PROJECT

Community Meeting Sunday, Jan. 19, 4-6 PM  
ROW Community/Senior Center, Grandview Road, Twin Peaks

Key Information for Public Notice  
The Church of the Woods Project, Hwy 18, Rimforest  
Review and Discussion of Final Environmental Impact Report Released Jan 10, 2020.

## Are You Aware That This Project Would Result in:

- ▶ Mountain Top Removal of the Hwy 18/ Daley Canyon Corner, Filling of a Natural Valley with Stream and Riparian Habitat
- ▶ Seven New Stoplights on Hwy 18 and Hwy 189/Daley Canyon Project Will Contribute to and Cause Significant and Unavoidable Traffic Impacts.. Your Travel on Hwy 18 Through Rimforest will be Negatively Altered Forever. See Pages FEIR-423 and FEIR-424, Master Responses for Details
- ▶ Wrought Iron Fencing Along Hwy 18 and 10 ft. Retaining Walls Obstructing Wildlife Movement
- ▶ County Identified Wildlife Corridors Between Strawberry Creek and Grass Valley Will Be Significantly Damaged
- ▶ Little Bear Creek Begins on This Property and Provides 50-66% of the Water into Lake Arrowhead. 311 Parking Spaces will Likely Result in Contamination of our Water Supply. 14 acres of developed infrastructure adjacent to very steep slopes will further degrade wildlife habitat and result in further erosion into Little Bear Creek.
- ▶ Disturbed/Graded Area of Project Involves Removing All Trees and Vegetation from 16.9 Acres, 62.3% of Project Acreage
- ▶ Significant and Unavoidable Impacts Due to Construction Noise Which Could Last for 435 Days. Table 2-2, Page 2-25, DREIR
- ▶ Requiring Extensive Fuel Modification Zones Due to High Fire Risk
- ▶ Jan 23, 2020, Planning Commission Hearing at 9 AM, Would Result in Final Approval or Denial of Project. There is No Intention of Having a Board of Supervisors Public Hearing as in Most Projects.

"This public notice is co-sponsored by Mtns Group of the Sierra Club and the Save Our Forest Association, Inc."









PROJECT

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whole streambed to the San Bernardino Flood Control.”

In a written comment to the Draft EIR, the Sierra Club of San Bernardino states “We believe this DREir remains functionally insufficient...” “Fundamental project information and predictable impact information is still missing, deliberately skipped or seemingly deferred (to) until after the project is approved.” They conclude that because of the vital missing information a thorough action/analysis cannot be performed on the environmental impact of the project.

The Planning commission responded. “The DREIR was prepared in full compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), State CEQA Guidelines, and the County of San Bernardino Guidelines including project definition, foreseeable impacts, and feasible mitigation measures.”

To some members of the opposition, another conflict of interest was made by the County. The County scheduled two events for the mountain communities at the same time, on the same day, — the Point-in-Time Count for the homeless and the Church in the Woods Project hearing. Although different departments scheduled these events, when Supervisor Rutherford’s office declined to intervene and request a schedule change. Instead, she deferred to the departments. “There often scheduling conflicts that can arise. And also understanding that people don’t have to be present to be able to speak on the item. They can submit written comments,” said Heidi Duron, Supervising Planner for the County of San Bernardino Land Use Services ”

According to Hiedi Duron, ten days is the minimum for the amount of time for availability between the Final EIR’s release and the hearing.

Akins likened the church to the biblical story of Zerubbabel — a story he has shared with his congregation: After the Israelites were exiled in Babylon, the first group to come back to Jerusalem was led by Zerubbabel. The man laid the foundation for the temple but was met with political opposition.

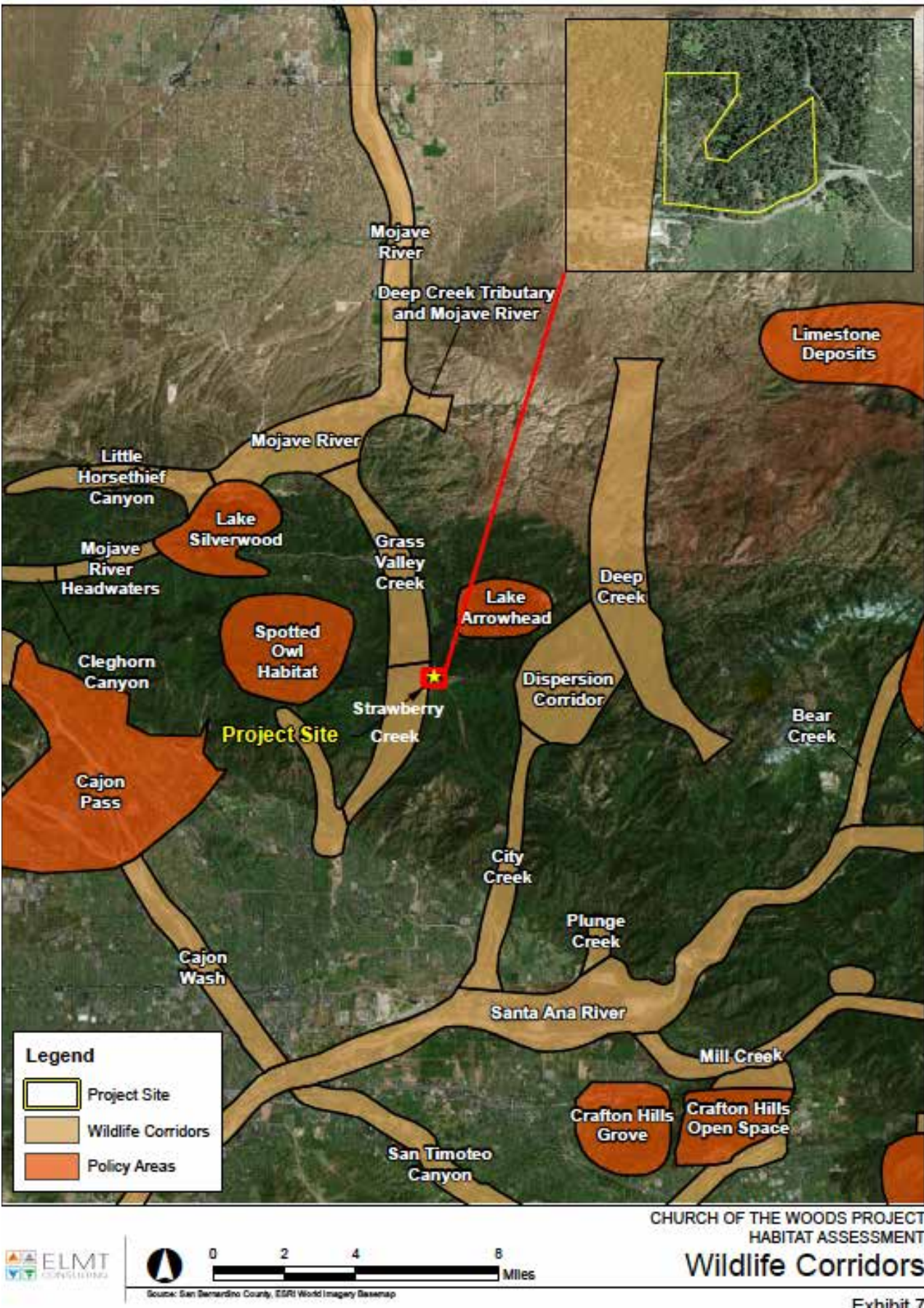
“So he stopped building the temple for sixteen years until they started again and built and finished the temple.

“We’ve been at it 16 years,” Akins said, about the Church of the Woods Project. “I believe God’s saying it’s time. Let’s rebuild the temple.”

Sherman said at the Sierra Club meeting that the last paragraph of his letter he wrote a year ago for the Draft EIR still applies to the final report on the Church of the Woods Project:

“To sum up, in over seventeen years of professional environmental review, I have never seen such an environmentally-harmful project, proposed on a more sensitive, unique and ecologically important site, and based upon such faulty and unfounded assertions of legitimacy.”

Sherman who claims he’s a wetlands expert. Well, we don’t have any more wetlands on our project. We sold that



Wildlife corridors from the county’s Habitat Assessment

Rutherford Acts to Ensure Mountain Voices Heard on Project

CONTRIBUTED BY SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

Mountain residents won’t have to travel down the hill to comment on a contentious project set to be considered at a San Bernardino County Planning Commission meeting on January 23.

“Last year when I learned the Planning Commission would be considering the Church of the Woods project, I requested that Land Use Services establish a video conference location in Twin Peaks where residents could view the meeting and speak on the proposal,” said Supervisor Janice Rutherford, who represents the Rim of the World Mountain communities. “This project has been in the works for 17 years, and there are a lot of residents on both sides that want to be heard and I want to make sure the Planning Commission hears from everyone.”

The video conference station will be at the Twin Peaks Government Center located at 26010 State Highway 189 in Twin Peaks. Each speaker will be given three minutes to comment. The Planning Commission meeting is set to begin at 9 a.m., Jan. 23 in the Covington Chambers at 385 N. Arrowhead Avenue in San Bernardino. The meeting will be rescheduled in the event of inclement weather.



Second District Supervisor Janice Rutherford

The Planning Commission will decide whether to grant a conditional use permit to Church of the Woods to develop a religious facility consisting of a 27,364 square-foot, two-story Youth Center/Gymnasium, recreational facilities, sports field, 41,037 square-foot, two-story assembly building with a maximum seating capacity of 600, and a 1500 square-foot, two-story maintenance/caretaker unit on a 27.12-acre site in Rimforest.

The Final Environmental Impact Report for the project can be viewed online at [www.sbcounty.gov](http://www.sbcounty.gov) or at the following locations: Twin Peaks Office, 26010 State Hwy. 189, Twin Peaks; Lake Arrowhead Library, 27235 State Hwy. 189, Lake Arrowhead; Running Springs Library, 2677 Whispering Pines, Running Springs; Crestline Library 24105 Lake Gregory Drive, Crestline, and the Planning Division office, 385 N. Arrowhead Avenue, San Bernardino. Anyone wishing to view documents at the Planning Division should call (909) 387-8311 to ensure someone is available to assist.

Comments can also be submitted in writing by email at [Tom. Nievesz@lus.sbcounty.gov](mailto:Nievesz@lus.sbcounty.gov) and by mail at Land Use Services – Planning Division, Attn: Tom Nievesz, 385 N. Arrowhead Avenue, First Floor San Bernardino, CA 92415-0187.

Caltrans’ Initial Environment Study on Proposed Highway 18 Project

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) proposes to repair, reline or replace twenty-one existing culverts at various locations along SR-18 between 48th Street and SR-138 [Post Mile (PM) T8.0 to R17.8] in the County of San Bernardino. The project would also remove and reconstruct sections of the metal beam guard railing (MBGR) and double thrie beam barrier (DTBB) in locations where replacement of culverts would occur. The existing culverts are in need of repair, relining, or replacing as they have reached their design service life and are experiencing deterioration. The project would restore the drainage systems functionality and extend the design service life of each culvert.

Caltrans studied the effects this project may have on the environment. Our studies show the proposed project will not significantly affect the quality of the environment. The report that explains the effects of the project is called a Draft Initial Study (IS). This notice is to advise you of the preparation of the Initial Study with Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration and of its availability for you to read, and to offer the opportunity to request a public hearing, public information meeting, or to provide comments, and the intent to adopt this Mitigated Negative Declaration.

Copies of the Draft IS with Proposed MND, including associated maps, are available for review during regular business hours at:

- Crestline Branch Library (24105 Lake Gregory Drive, Crestline, 92325);
- Caltrans District 8, 464 West 4th Street, 6th Floor, MS 823, San Bernardino, CA 92401-1400.

Do you have any comments about processing the project with an IS with Proposed MND? Do you disagree with the findings of our study as set forth in the IS with (Proposed MND)? Would you care to make any other comments on the project? We’d like to hear what you think. Please submit your comments in writing no later than February 10, 2020, to:

- California Department of Transportation ATTN: Renetta Cloud, Senior Environmental Planner 464

West 4th Street, 6th Floor, MS 823 San Bernardino, CA 92401-1400

- or via email to: [SBd-18\\_Reline\\_Replace\\_Culverts@dot.ca.gov](mailto:SBd-18_Reline_Replace_Culverts@dot.ca.gov). Please include “SR-18 Reline or Replace Culverts Project” in the subject line.

If there are no major comments, Caltrans will proceed with the project’s design. For more information about this study or this project, please contact the Caltrans District 8 Office of Public Affairs at (909)383-4631. For individuals with sensory disabilities, this document can be made available in Braille, in large print, on audiocassette, or on computer disk. To obtain a copy in one of these alternate formats, call or write to Renetta Cloud, Senior Environmental Planner, 464 W. 4th Street, 6th floor, MS 823, San Bernardino, CA 92401-1400; (909) 383-6323; or use the California Relay Service 1-800- 735-2929 (TTY to Voice), 1-800-735-2922 (Voice to TTY), 1-800-854-7784 (From or to Speech to Speech), or dial 711.

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