



February 21, 2023

Azhar Khan, Planner
County of San Bernardino
Land Use Services Department
385 N. Arrowhead Avenue, 1st Floor
San Bernardino, CA 92415-0182
Azhar.khan@lus.sbcounty.gov

Re: Wonder Inn Hotel/Resort (Twentynine Palms)
Project No. J-2021-00163 IS/MND

Dear Mr. Khan:

The Morongo Basin Conservation Association advocates for the healthy desert environment that nurtures our rural character, cultural wealth, and economic well-being. For 53 years we have worked to preserve the economic and environmental welfare of the Morongo Basin against exploitation deemed not in the best interest of the residents; and to promote master planning for the entire area known as the Greater Morongo Basin including all the various communities therein.

Project Description Summary

The MBCA takes this opportunity to comment on the "Notice of Intent (NOI) to Adopt an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Wonder Inn Project (Project) with a concurrent submittal of a General Plan Land Use Amendment from Rural Living (RL) to Commercial (CS) and a Zoning Amendment from Rural living, 5-acre minimum lot size (RL-5) to Service Commercial (CS) and a Conditional Use Permit for a proposed hotel use with the conversion of an existing 4,407- square foot office building to a restaurant/lobby and the construction of 106 guest rooms, 5,000 square foot conference room, 3,985 square foot wellness center and ancillary structures on a 24.4-acre site, located at 78201 Amboy Road, Twentynine Palms in an unincorporated area of San Bernardino County known as Wonder Valley. **The Project Site is not located within any Countywide Plan Area.**" (Emphasis added)

Project Description Correction

The Project Site is not located within any Countywide Plan Area. This is incorrect – see Countywide Plan Policy Map LU-2 General Boundaries. Wonder Valley site is not located in any **Community Plan Area** True. Wonder Valley **is** within the Countywide Plan Area. Wonder Valley is an unincorporated community within the sphere of influence of the city of Twentynine Palms. Wonder Valley is Community Service Area (CSA) 70M paying taxes for certain services. Also see the *Wonder Valley*

Community Action Guide for the community's strengths and opportunities, values, and aspiration statements.

What does "not located within any Countywide Plan Area" say to the public, Planning Commissioners and Supervisors? It says that nothing stands in the way of the proposed Wonder Inn development. All issues have been considered and mitigations will solve any problems. The MBCA and Wonder Valley residents are not in agreement and find that under CEQA an EIR is warranted. CEQA is intended to inform government decisionmakers and the public about the potential environmental effects of proposed activities and to prevent significant, avoidable environmental damage. What is missing?

The EIR will acknowledge the newly revealed Resort Activities and the 24 Private Villa subdivision advertised for sale on social media and analyze for the individual and cumulative impacts of the now 130-acres development on the community and environment. The legality of this advertising and fund raising without county knowledge or approval of the projects is questioned.

1. ATV and Hot Air Balloon Adventures, Horseback riding
2. Live music around fire features
3. Resort VIP Membership Discounts
4. A subdivision of 24 private villa 4 bedroom, 3 bath homes on individual 5-acre lots each with a swimming pool, hot tub, outdoor shower, fire pit, solar panels, and electric car charger. The homes can be lived in full time and/or managed professionally as STRs for \$1000 per night. The 5-acre lots are currently for sale for \$150,000.

This social media information was provided as a Project Addendum to Mr. Khan by email on February 20, 2023

The EIR would describe Wonder Valley as a Super Disadvantaged Community

Wonder Valley Census: 818 population with 412 households

Median Household Income (MHI): \$32,679 [from the American Community Survey 2014-2018 report]

The State MHI for the same period is \$86,165

The area is 38% of the State MHI and is a State Super Disadvantaged Community

State Disadvantaged Communities (DAC) are <80% of the State MHI

Super Disadvantaged Communities (SDAC) are <60% of the State MHI

The EIR should include the County Service Area-CSA 70M to show county and Community Investment

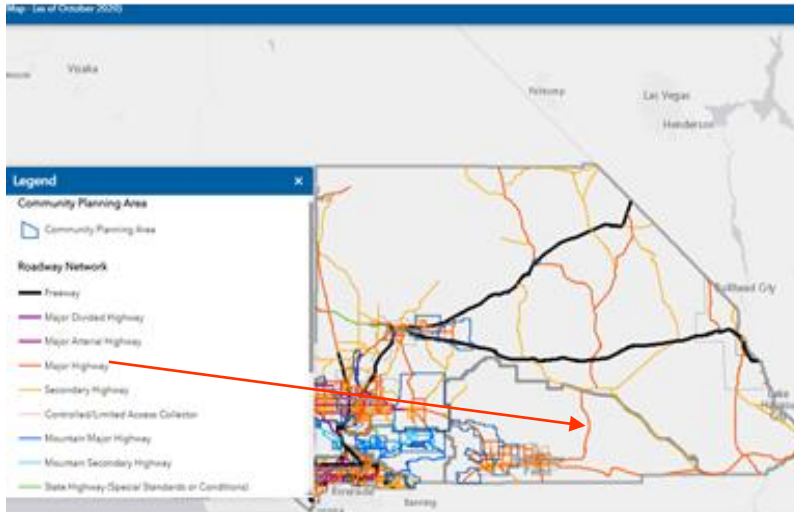
Wonder Valley CSA 70, Zone M is located ten miles east of Twentynine Palms and was established by an act of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on August 14, 1972, to provide road maintenance for 178.41 miles of road to the community of Wonder Valley. Currently parcel owners pay \$166.84/fire; \$50.39/road grading; \$10.30/park; \$5.30/TV = \$232.83 annually to the CSA.¹

- The district has a small park with a gazebo, 5 picnic table, a few in-ground BBQ's and play equipment or younger kids. It's a nice place for people to stop and rest when traveling through the area.
- The district also has a community center which hosts municipal advisory meetings (CSA70-M Fire, Park, and Roads), Slice of Life (women's local group), Dale Basin Well Owner's Association for residents in the Basin that are concerned about their wells. It is for rent for special occasions.

¹ <https://specialdistricts.sbcounty.gov/roads/road-districts/csa70m>

- The district also hosts a book program in which they lend books, VHS tapes, and DVDs at no charge to local residents. They can sit in the community center and read, work puzzles, or just sit and chat. This program is open on Monday and Wednesday from 9:00 a.m. – noon.

The EIR should accurately describe the regional Project Site Location



“Regionally, the Project Site is generally located north of State Route 62, east of State Route 247, south of the Bullion Mountains, and west of United States Route 95 in the City of Twentynine Palms. Primary access to the property is from Amboy Road. The Project Site is located approximately 1.3 miles west of Goodwin Road, 5.7 miles east of Utah Trail.” (IS Page 4)

What is missing from this description is the greater regional perspective. Joshua Tree NP is the western end point in the

greater east Mojave Desert ecotourism playing field.

Amboy Road (see arrow) is the Major Highway in the Community Planning Area leaving Twentynine Palms going east through Wonder Valley, then north through Sheephole Pass and Mojave Trails National Monument to Amboy, east to Kelbaker Road which crosses the I-40 into the Mojave National Preserve before crossing I-15 at Baker where it becomes SR127 to Shoshone and Death Valley NP.

Or go east on the I-15 to Las Vegas. There are four major destinations east of Joshua Tree NP and traffic could be going either to or from these end points through Wonder Valley. Wonder Valley is the first/last in a series of picturesque basins between the numerous North-South trending mountain ranges. The east desert region of California is within the Basin and Range Province and many travelers are attracted to its remote beauty, quiet, and dark night skies.

The EIR should accurately describe the land use pattern and how it has shaped the community.

From the Wonder Valley Community Plan

“Wonder Valley is a community within the Morongo Basin, east of Joshua Tree and Twentynine Palms. After homesteaders acquired land following the 1938 Small Tracts Act, hundreds to thousands of homesteader cabins were built in the area. Since then many homesteads have been abandoned and demolished. Today Wonder Valley has a sparse but diverse population of nature lovers, outdoor enthusiasts, desert rats, retirees, and artists.”

As will be demonstrated, the Proposed 130-acre Wonder Inn Hotel/Subdivision is not a passive development that will barely be noticed by the wildlife, the residents, those vacationing in the locally-owned 84 STRs, and those journeying into the wild lands to the north.

Aesthetics

- a) Would the project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

“The CEQA guidelines do not provide a definition of what constitutes a “scenic vista” or “scenic resource.” That’s fair. The individuals experiencing a scenic vista are the definers.



Photo 1: Wonder Valley with Valley Mountain

We are in the Basin and Range Province and the basin, in this case valley, with the surrounding mountains are the ever-changing scenic vista that we travel through (or live in). In the distance, in front of Valley Mountain with the active storm overhead, we see the individual spaced cabins, the scenic historical signature of place in Wonder Valley.

The cabins are visible. They are small and spaced apart on their 2.5 to 5.0-acre Small Tracts. It is wishful thinking that the open design of the 25-acre Resort with 106 rooms in

two stories and 210 parking spaces and pool and walkways all needing lights at night will blend in – either day or night. It might blend only if the viewer had too many drinks in the bar. Now add the advertised 24 villa homes on 5-acre lots and expand the description area to 130-acres. The cumulative aesthetic impact of the Proposed Project and the advertised but not officially proposed 130-acre subdivision, will have a significant impact on the scenic vista.

“These structures were determined not to have historic value.” (IS Page 17)



Photo 2: Pink-building formerly DEC headquarters

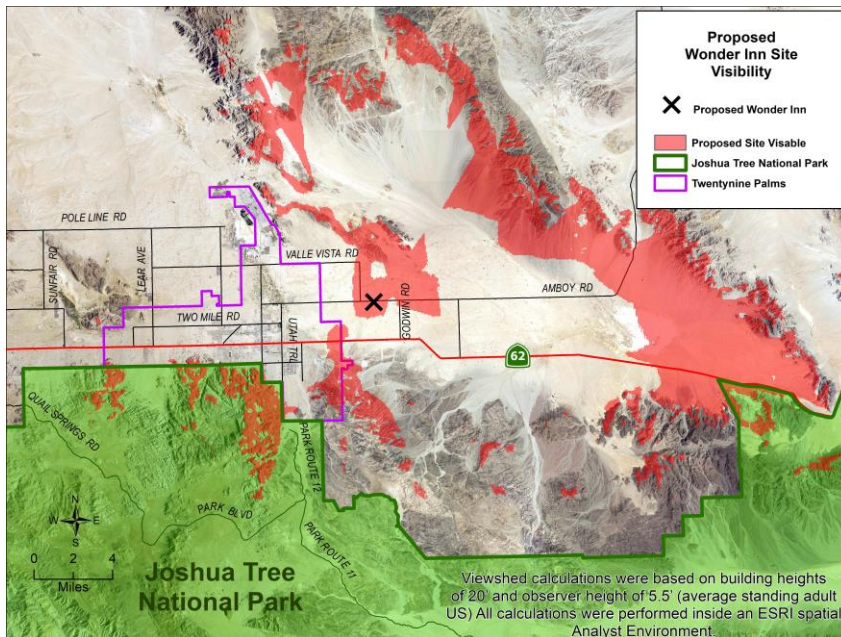
The pink-building to be repurposed for the Proposed Hotel is historic. It was designed, built, and used by the Desert Electric Cooperative Inc. on the 30-acre site in 1962. It contained the yards for DEC vehicles and other equipment. At the time the DEC serviced 500 miles of distribution lines supplying more than 2000 Small Tract homes with power and light.²

The IS determines that because of its open design concept and height limitations it would not block any views so less than significant impact. (IS Page 17).

There is concern by the community and tourists that the Proposed Wonder Inn will become the “view” in this wide-open landscape (Photo 1) where the tallest buildings, other than the pink -Proposed Project building (Photo 2), are the fire station and one two-story house.

² Twentynine Palms Historical Society Old Schoolhouse Journal, Winter 2022

The Visibility map was calculated for buildings 20 feet high. The proposed structures cannot exceed 35 feet. The visibility will be greater than seen on the map.



Factoring in the cumulative effect of the yet to be officially proposed 24 villas each on a 5-acre lot the Proposed Project will have a significant unmitigable impact on the viewshed for residents and those passing through.

Figure 2: Proposed Wonder Inn Site Visibility

Viewshed calculations were based on building height of 20 feet and observer height of 5.5 feet (average standing adult US). All calculations were performed inside an ESRI spatial Analyst Environment.

d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare, which will adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

The EIR must accurately account for the light/glare of the Proposed 130-acre Wonder Inn Hotel/Subdivision.

The developers report that they will follow the SBC Dark Sky Ordinance regarding lumens, light shielding, special pathway lighting, use of motion sensors, and the parking lot Pole Lighting will use nighttime friendly products. **AND**, all lighting will be extinguished by 11:00 pm per the Dark Sky Curfew.

The developers also advertise live music around fire features that will not only entertain the guests in the 106 rooms but also the party goers in the 24 villas. **Question:** Who will enforce the 11:00 pm curfew? Will the party goers in the 24 villas give a care about the Dark Sky Ordinance. Who pays \$1000/night to shut down at an 11:00 pm curfew? There will be a significant nighttime impact that will not be mitigated without law enforcement.

Wonder Valley is in a special place. It is dark. People come to the desert to view the dark sky.

Light Pollution

...light pollution is increasing, notwithstanding the countermeasures purportedly put in operation to limit it.

Science, 20 January 2023 • Vol 379 Issue 6629

Exiting Twentynine Palms, Amboy Road connects Wonder Valley to Death Valley NP a 360-mile/6 hour dark ride with light blinks only in Baker (I-15) and Shoshone. The darkness is the pride of

Post Office Box 24, Joshua Tree CA 92252 – www.mbconservation.org
 MBCA is a 501(c)3 non-profit, community based, all volunteer organization
 Email info@mbconservation.org

Wonder Valley residents and the County and helps fuel enthusiasm for the 84 residential STRs. The 130-acre glow of the Proposed Wonder Inn Hotel/Subdivision would permanently rob the community of a revenue source.

The EIR must address the cumulative effects on the unmitigable loss of the Wonder Valley scenic vista.

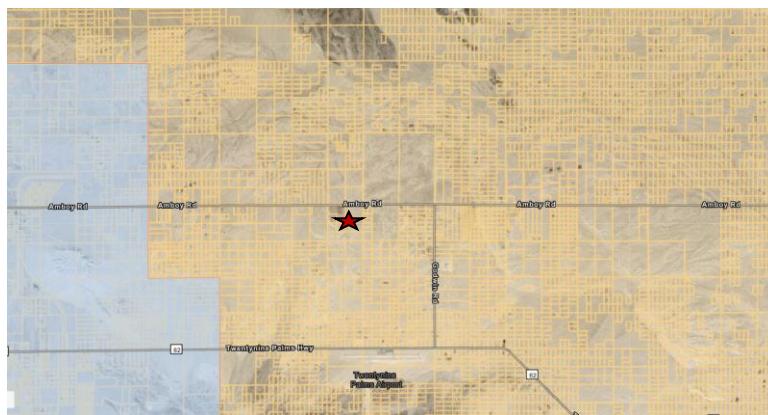
Air Quality

- b) Result in a net increase of criteria pollutants PM 10 and PM 2.5 in the Mojave Desert Air District which is out of compliance.
- c) Expose sensitive receptors to substantial PM10 and PM2.5 pollutant concentrations

No doubt when purchasing the pink house property and those surrounding acres the buyer saw the beautifully graded dirt roads in the area and imaged OHV recreation. The County knows better since they were lead players in the passage of the OHV Ordinance §28.0403 in 2010.

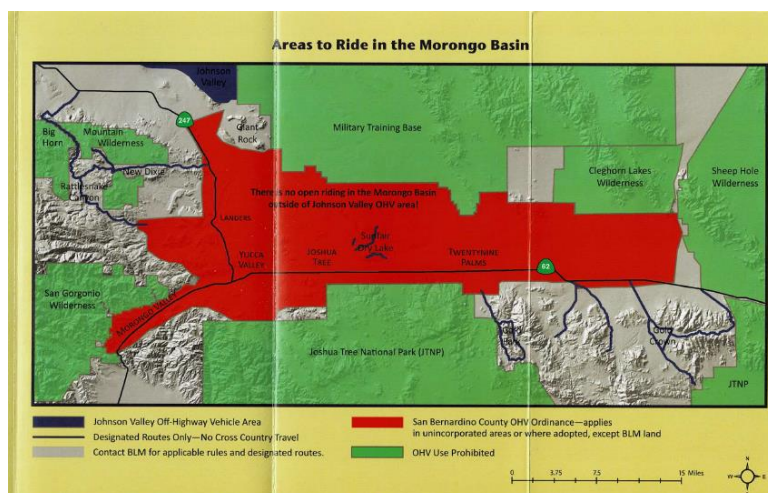
Wonder Valley sits on a linear dune and when vegetation is removed, or the crust disturbed, the dust blows – hence the OHV Ordinance. Today the Sheriff's Operation Dust Devil is continuing to deal with OHV problems desert wide on a finite budget.

"The goal of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department Off Highway Vehicle Team is to contact off highway vehicle enthusiasts and educate them in the safe and proper use of their equipment, to include use of helmets, seat belts, and operating on designated off highway vehicle trails and open areas. Many enthusiasts are unaware of the locations of the legal and open off highway vehicle riding areas."



Dirt roads (yellow) in Wonder Valley that evolved from the Small-Tract Act and the purchase of thousands of 5-acre tracts which came with 50 feet of access along with utility access.

★ Proposed Wonder Inn Hotel/Subdivision

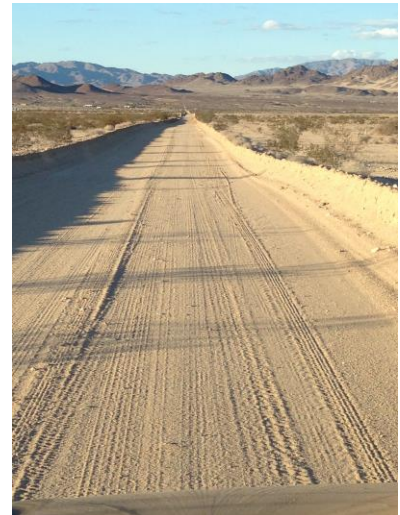


Map of the Morongo Basin showing legal OHV riding (blue lines) and areas where it is not legal to ride (red).

Hotel guests want ATV adventures and see opportunity all around.

Question: How will the OHV Ordinance be enforced?

The County is aware that dust contributes to asthma and cardiovascular disease. On the CalEnviroScreen 4.0 Wonder Valley rates 100 percentile for cardiovascular disease.



The EIR must accurately describe the cumulative effects of numerous tourists enjoying the advertised ATV adventures as well as exploring in their own cars on the maintained dirt roads at speeds causing massive unmitigable dust plumes.

Biological Resources

- a) Have substantial adverse effects ...on special status species
- b) Interfere substantially with the movement of species...or migratory wildlife corridors.

The EIR must account for the cumulative adverse effects of the Proposed 130-acre Wonder Inn/Subdivision on the presence and terrestrial connectivity of the federally and state listed Agassiz Desert Tortoise.

IS Will the Project

- a) Have a substantial effect on any special status species...Less that significant with mitigation.
- Initial Study: “Despite a systematic search of the Project Site, **no live tortoises, suitable burrows, or signs were observed on the project site during the site investigation. Based on the results of the field investigation and lack of suitable burrows and no observed sign, desert tortoise was determined to have a low potential to occur onsite.**” (Initial Study Page 33, bold added)

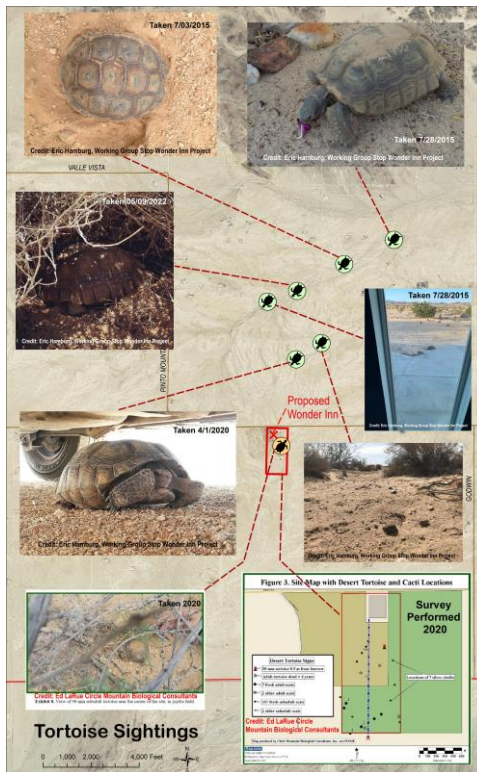
On January 20, 2023, I provided to Azhar Khan, Project Planner, a copy of the Circle Mountain Biological Report which found direct evidence of the Desert Tortoise on the site.

Circle Mountain Biological Consultants (CMBC) Focused Survey for Agassiz’s Desert Tortoise, Habitat Evaluation for the Burrowing Owl, and General Biological Resource Assessment for a 40-acre+/- Site (APN 0625-071-04 & 09) in the community of Wonder Valley, San Bernardino County, California Job#: 20-012 April 2020

Introduction Page 1 “Circle Mountain Biological Consultants, Inc. was contracted by Mr. Alan Greenberg on behalf of Ecotech Design (Proponent) to perform a focused survey...” Subsequently, Ecotech Design ceased its professional relationship with Mr. Greenberg and the Survey, although

completed, was never paid for. The Study was also not included by Mr. Greenberg in the Habitat Assessment for the Proposed Project.

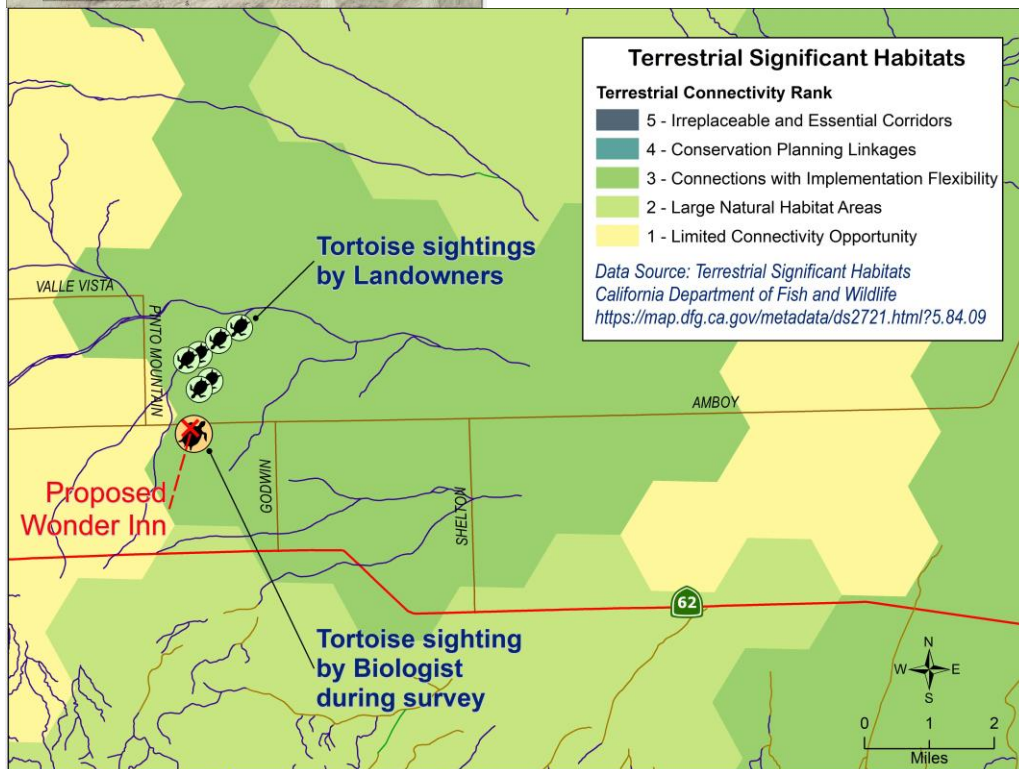
With this background MBCA requested from nearby residents any known tortoise sightings with geolocations so they could be mapped as shown.



Six Agassiz Desert Tortoise photos with geolocations were submitted and mapped as shown.

Please note that all tortoise sightings, including the individual on the Wonder Inn site are within a Terrestrial Significant Habitat containing Connections with Implementation Flexibility. The Proposed Project Habitat Assessment did not include this map. It referenced the US Fish and Wildlife lack of maps but not the California Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, which provided this information. See the map for data source.

The EIR must account for the Proposed Project site (130-acres) as a location where living tortoise and tortoise sign and burrows can be found. The surrounding Wonder Valley area is excellent tortoise habitat with living tortoise moving through. Mitigation will be difficult if not impossible. State and Federal permits are required,



MBCA asks that the comments provided by the Desert Tortoise Council (10 February 2023) and Saving Slowpoke (16 February 2023) be incorporated into the MBCA comments.

Please also incorporate the comments of Kerrie Aley (18 February 2023) on Transportation and VMT into the MBCA comments.

The MBCA has read many of the letters provided to Mr. Khan through Stop Wonder Inn.org. These letters come from the residents and speak substantially about the effects the Proposed Wonder Inn Hotel/Subdivision would have on the environment and their lives. We are pleased to join their ranks with our letter.

It appears perfectly clear that approval of the Proposed Project and the CUP with a MND is unsupported by the current studies submitted and incorporated into the Initial Study. An EIR under the purpose and intent of CEQA is required.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pat Flanagan".

Pat Flanagan
Board, Morongo Basin Conservation Association