



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Rachel Schwartz/PR AdvantEDGE Inc.

Phone: 310.990.2764

Email: rachel@pr-a.biz

***“Half-Truths and Inaccuracies” By City of Los Angeles –
Disappointing Decision Today in Legal Challenge to City Over Its Decision to Permanently
Close Public Access to World Famous Hollywood Sign Via Popular Griffith Park Trailhead***

Los Angeles, CA, March 22, 2018 – Today, the Los Angeles Superior Court handed down a disappointing decision in response to a legal challenge filed by Friends of Griffith Park, together with the Griffith J. Griffith Charitable Trust, and the Los Feliz Oaks Homeowners Association challenging the City of Los Angeles’ decision to close the Beachwood Gate to the Hollyridge Trail in Griffith Park on April 18, 2017. The court denied the petitioners complaint that the City chose to act in ways that were prohibited by its own charter, its municipal and administrative codes, and its zoning rules when it decided to close the Beachwood gate altogether to pedestrian traffic. The petitioners are particularly dismayed that the court arrived at this decision because when the City filed a stipulation with the court agreeing to close the Beachwood Gate completely, it was peppered with “half-truths and inaccuracies.”

It was both shocking and disturbing to hear the City argue in Court today that, in their view, the General Manager of the Recreation and Parks Department has the right to close every public access point to Griffith Park at his/her discretion without any public notice or public input.

Friends of Griffith Park (FoGP) is an all-volunteer California non-profit 501(c) (3) dedicated to preserving and protecting Griffith Park’s natural habitat, biodiversity, and historic features, for current and future generations. FoGP is committed to ensuring that Griffith Park, a public park and Los Angeles’ largest Historic-Cultural Monument, remain open, natural, and free to all citizens of Los Angeles. That the City’s decision to end pedestrian access to Griffith Park from Beachwood Canyon was not only made without public input, but also in violation of the City’s own established procedures for taking actions of this kind, should be of concern to citizens of Los Angeles, and beyond. This decision, and the City’s overall position vis-à-vis closing public access points to Griffith Park, strikes at the heart of FoGP’s principles for open access for park patrons. It also underscores the more universal need, as articulated in this lawsuit, to ensure accountable, honest, responsive government and protect the region’s environment and the public’s environmental and quality-of-life amenities.

For as long as anyone can remember, people have accessed Griffith Park's Hollyridge Trail through its Beachwood Canyon entrance. The popular trail affords one of the easiest access points and best views of the world famous Los Angeles landmark, the Hollywood Sign.

But starting in 2014, a stable, Sunset Ranch, that owns a right-of-way easement over the same stretch of land began complaining. In response, the City of Los Angeles Recreation and Park Commission, after a properly no-

ticed public hearing, voted to replace the old, short, metal bar at the Beachwood entrance with a fancy electrical gate, using over \$250,000 in taxpayer money to do so. The gate, which the City announced with much fanfare would provide renewed safe access for pedestrians, features separate entrances to keep cars and people apart. Despite this, the stable later sued the City, alleging hikers were interfering with its easement.

A court found that Sunset Ranch does not have an exclusive right to the access road that leads to the trailhead, but that the City had interfered with it by channeling pedestrians to the wrong areas, and by the City's security guards turning away certain motorists who were paying customers of the stable. The court ordered the City to stop turning away the stable's motorist customers, and to steer and guide pedestrians differently. Its order read: "The City of Los Angeles is . . . ordered to provide public pedestrian access to the Hollyridge Trail, at a location as closest [sic.] to the start of the subject easement (i.e., the location of the Beachwood Gate . . .) or at the pre-2001 access point (from Hollyridge Drive), as is practicable."

Instead the City and Sunset Ranch entered into what petitioners charge was an "improper backroom deal" in which they decided to close the gate at Beachwood Canyon completely, giving control over a gate (paid for at taxpayer expense) and a trailhead (which belongs to the public) to a private party, forever. The City entered into a stipulation with the stable, which included several falsehoods.

Nearby resident associations – Los Feliz Improvement Association, Oaks Homeowners Association, Beachwood Canyon Neighborhood Association, and Lake Hollywood Homeowners Association – were shocked to learn of the City's decision especially since it directly contradicts the judge's ruling.

Perhaps the most inaccurate of the City's falsehoods directly relates to the manner in which it "complied" with the judge's order. It read, "[t]he City currently provides and will continue to provide access to Hollyridge trail and other trails through an official and published entrance to Griffith Park at the terminus of Canyon Drive. Canyon Drive runs parallel and 1,500 feet to the east of Beachwood Drive." The assertion that Canyon Drive runs "1,500 feet to the east of Beachwood Drive" is deceptive to the point of being misleading, because this lawsuit involves people and not birds. For a person to walk or drive from the Beachwood gate to the terminus of Canyon Drive it is considerably more than 1500 feet. After a 3.05 mile, twenty-minute drive, our tired, re-directed hiker would have to hike another 2.35 miles, uphill, just to get to the Hollyridge Trail. A key Recreation and Parks employee has since acknowledged the falseness of the City's statements.

There were many ways the City could have complied with this order. It is critical to recognize that the court gave it options and did not bind it one way or another. The City could have handled the matter administratively, for example, simply ordering the same security guards to channel pedestrians in a manner that was not burdensome to the stable, and to help direct traffic so that access was as close as possible to the Beachwood Gate without interfering with the stable's vehicular traffic. It could have widened the access road by a couple feet, and constructed a small, dedicated path. It could have surveyed the adjacent land and gone through the proper processes to correct obvious encroachments and provide access there.

Instead the City chose to act in ways that were prohibited by its own charter, its municipal and administrative codes, and its zoning rules – taking actions that could only be taken after public processes. The City decided to close the Beachwood gate altogether to public pedestrian traffic, and to direct the massive amounts of traffic (15,000 people per month) to another entrance to the park, burdening that entrance.

What is most telling is that the City required legislative action and public process – an agendized, formal, public vote of its Recreation and Park Commission – to re-open the exact same gate in 2014. But the City asserted that it did not need such formalities to permanently close it.

The organizations involved in the lawsuit were simply seeking to enforce the City of Los Angeles's existing laws and policies that require processes, and which vest governing authority for decisions like this with certain

boards and commissions. The City was free to opt for the rather extreme and unnecessary decision it chose here – to close the Beachwood Canyon gate indefinitely to pedestrians – but only after following the correct procedures. The Board of Recreation and Park Commissioners and/or the city council should have held a noticed, public hearing, and voted on the terms of the stipulation.

The petitioners were also seeking to prevent the City from making a gift of public funds by turning control of the gate over to the stable, a private party. The Beachwood entrance to Griffith Park, which the City specifically improved with taxpayer funds to add a modern gate meant to “benefit . . . park visitors and residents of the surrounding community,” and openly promoted as a public access to Griffith Park has now been voluntarily handed over by the City to a private entity without any public process.

The gate was explicitly dedicated to public use and paid for by the public, and now the public cannot use it. The stable is operating the gate – city property – for its exclusive use and its exclusive benefit.

It is true that city emergency vehicles and/or an occasional maintenance truck can still access Griffith Park through the gate. However, those same city vehicles could access the park before, without the erection of a fancy electrical gate at taxpayer expense. The improvement of the gate and entrance therefore serve no purpose other than to help the business of the stable, a private entity. This is the very definition of misuse of public funds.

The plaintiffs filed the lawsuit to protect public access to Griffith Park, to correct the record, and to represent the interests of taxpayers and the common good.

Clare Darden, Trustee for Griffith J. Griffith Charitable Trust, said, “This decision chips away at the basic right of Angelenos to access not just Griffith Park, but all the City’s public parks. Any access threatened by special interest groups to Griffith Park land is a violation of Colonel Griffith’s declaration that the park be free and open to all.”

“We are very disappointed that the Court has upheld the city’s decision to close access to Griffith Park at the Beachwood gate, particularly in light of the City’s many misleading and false assertions in this case. This sets a terrible precedent for closing other access points. Friends of Griffith Park is an all-volunteer group of concerned citizens who want to assure that the public continues to have access to this magnificent public park. We did not seek out this lawsuit and we wish that the City had followed its own rules regarding the proper procedures and public input required prior to deciding to prohibit public access to Griffith Park at the Beachwood Canyon gate. The City had myriad options available to it to resolve this issue while maintaining public access to Griffith Park,” added Marian Dodge, President of Friends of Griffith Park. “We are currently considering our next steps,” said Dodge.

The City’s Department of Recreation and Parks General Manager Mike Shull has frequently assured the community that he wants to keep entrances to Griffith Park – specifically the entrance in Beachwood Canyon – open to the public. Friends of Griffith Park urges Shull and Councilmember Ryu to revisit the Beachwood Gate closure and immediately exercise one of the many safe, efficient and easily implementable options available to allow public access from Beachwood Canyon. One such option is the Alternative Access Plan which would move the pedestrian gate to the right of the vehicular gate and lead hikers up a 50-foot rise on a modular staircase to the Hollyridge Trail. Closing one trailhead sets an unacceptable precedent for closing others. Major trailheads with wide trails or fire roads are important in order to provide the public with safe hiking routes, while protecting the park’s rich habitat and wildlife.

Friends of Griffith Park (FoGP) is a California non-profit 501(c) (3) dedicated to preserving and protecting Griffith Park’s natural habitat, biodiversity, and historic features, for current and future generations. FoGP is committed to ensuring that Griffith Park, a public park and Los Angeles’ largest Historic-Cultural Monument, remain open, natural, and free to all citizens of Los Angeles.

The Griffith J. Griffith Charitable Trust (Griffith Park Trust), has roots dating back a century. The trust makes consistent efforts to protect the basic premise underlying Colonel Griffith's gift of Griffith Park to the City, and supports ongoing activities in the park. Public access to the park is a part of its core mission. The Griffith Park Trust famously objected when the City attempted to institute a fee for driving automobiles into the park. Today, it is supporting a much more basic issue: the right of pedestrians to access one of the park's trailheads, which gives hikers access to the park's entire network of trails. The Griffith Park Trust has reversionary rights to Griffith Park if the City violates the terms of the original grant.

More information and documentation is available at:
<http://www.friendsofgriffithpark.org/>