

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Open for discussion

Solano County debates future of newly acquired open space

By Liz Tascio
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SOUTHERN SOLANO COUNTY - As a nonprofit group celebrates the final phase of a nearly 4,000-acre open space acquisition, the county is still wondering what to do with the property.

In January, the Solano Land Trust purchased Vallejo Swett Ranch, 905 hilly green acres that form the western boundary of the Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills area. It was the last of three parcels that have been purchased from Pacific Gas & Electric Co. since 2002, completing a thick, 3,900-acre swath bordered by interstates 680 and 80.

The county supports developing a regional park system, but wants more information about what it would cost and how it could be funded. The land trust itself does not have the funds or the mission to operate a park, just to secure land from future development.

Residents may not know that much of the open space in Solano County is privately owned, said Bob Berman of the Solano Land Trust.

"They don't understand that for most of these lands, there's not permanent protection," he said.

The county Board of Supervisors decided in January to explore options other than creating a regional park district, which would require legislative approval from the state and a local vote.

The county could bring the land under its own parks and recreation division, which currently operates about 225 acres. Solano County's general plan lists 14 properties, including Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills, that it is interested in managing as park sites, possibly in partnership with other jurisdictions.

For now, cattle graze the gated Sky Valley area, and docents lead scheduled tours on weekends. Several rare and endangered species make their home on Vallejo Swett: the California red-legged frog, Swainson's hawk, the valley elderberry longhorn beetle and a native lily called dwarf soaproot.

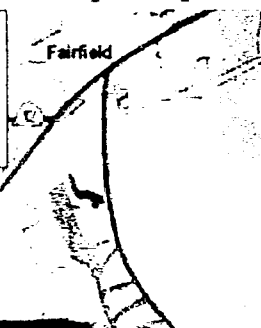
The Coastal Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board contributed about \$4.5 million of the \$5.2 million it took to buy the first two pieces of the PG&E land, Eastern Swett Ranch and King Ranch. The properties are watersheds for Suisun Marsh.

Vallejo Swett did not qualify for the same grants, but the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation of San Francisco approached the land trust, eventually contributing \$2.15 million of the \$2.75 million the land trust needed to buy the property.

Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills open space

The Solano Land Trust bought Vallejo Swett Ranch in January, completing a three-parcel acquisition of almost 4,000 acres. The land trust now owns almost 9,000 acres. Solano County is investigating ways to open the land as a regional park system.

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The Solano Land Trust, formed in 1986, aims to protect open space for public access and farming, either by buying the land outright or by acquiring conservation easements. The Vallejo Swett purchase brought its holdings to nearly 9,000 acres.

The county's economy depends on farming, and residents depend on open space for a good quality of life, Berman said.

Just look at brochures for housing developments, he said.

"They never show pictures of traffic backed up on the

bridge," Berman said. "They show open space and wildflowers."

Vallejo, Fairfield, Benicia and the county make up a joint powers authority dedicated to maintaining Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills as open space. In part, the cities like a natural buffer that keeps them distinct from one another.

Some members of the agricultural community worry that opening all of Sky Valley as a public park would bring in contagious diseases that could infect herds, and that hikers would ignore the private property lines of adjacent ranchers.

Russ Lester, a walnut farmer who sits on the land trust board of directors, wants the county to be very cautious in choosing what to do with the land he helped acquire.

For one thing, the county would lose out on property taxes if all the land became a public park, he said. He also worries that cattle farmers would suffer if contagions got trekked in on the soles of hiking boots.

"The problem is that all it takes is someone to bring in just a little bit of dirt contaminated with hoof-and-mouth disease," he said. "Once it's established in that area, it's very difficult to get rid of."

At the request of the Board of Supervisors, county employees are researching costs of operating a regional park system, said Veronica Ferguson, county director of general services.

No matter what, Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills will remain protected open space indefinitely. The land trust is looking into buying one more connecting parcel, about 2,000 acres owned by Santa Clara. Berman supposes that will cost about \$5 million.

"It really is what you would call legacy work," Berman said. "Whatever we pay for it today is going to seem like a great deal 50 or 100 years from now."

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