ROOM FOR A VIEW
Trust teams with cities, park district to buy Lafayette land

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A conservation group will purchase a 25-acre slice of Lafayette ridge land visible from much of Central Contra Costa County, which will become open space instead of a development of homes with great views.

The Muir Heritage Land Trust announced this week the purchase of the Acalanes Ridge property for $1.3 million. In an unusual deal, the group will get financial help from the cities of Lafayette and Walnut Creek and the East Bay Regional Park District.

Leaders of the different organizations said they all wanted to protect what is a scenic backdrop to Lafayette and Walnut Creek and a panorama to view parts of at least 10 cities in three valleys.

"This protects a ridge with exquisite beauty," said Linus Eukel, executive director of the Muir Heritage Land Trust, which has preserved more than 2,000 acres between Martinez and Hercules. "This is not just about protecting a place for the local neighbors, but about saving a place of import-

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tance that can be seen from much of the county and providing recreation access to it.

When the space is opened to the public next year, hikers, and horse and mountain bike riders will be able to reach the land via several trails, including the regional trail between Briones Regional Park and Mount Diablo State Park.

The land looks down on a mosaic of roofs, gardens, trees and swimming pools in suburban Lafayette, and glass and steel high-rises along Interstate 680 in Walnut Creek. On a recent tour, birds twittered on the hill, and a weed cutter whined above the low din of freeway traffic.

The property owners had proposed building one large home on the land, and could have sought permission to build up to two more under Lafayette’s zoning rules. Neighbors objected.

Coming up with a purchase deal was challenging.

The land was too big for Lafayette to afford, yet too small to become a unit of the East Bay Regional Park District, which operates much larger recreation areas.

Walnut Creek owns the adjacent 170-acre Acalanes Ridge Open Space, but it’s difficult for one city to buy recreation land in another.

The solution: Everyone chips in money, and the land trust becomes the owner. Under the deal, the park district and two cities each put up 30 percent of the sale price with money from a regional park bond measure approved by East Bay voters in 2008.

Muir Heritage agreed to raise the other 10 percent to close the deal this December. The land trust also agreed to raise another nearly $300,000 in contributions to provide an endowment to pay for care and maintenance of the land.

“It’s a remarkable arrangement to bring everyone together like this,” said Lafayette City Manager Steven Falk. “It just shows how seriously conservation is taken. This is a critical purchase for those who care about conservation and open space.”

The cost-sharing deal was approved by the regional park board Tuesday, and is scheduled to go before Lafayette and Walnut Creek city councils later this month.

The property will remain closed to the public until some time after the sale becomes final in December, Eukel said.

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