

LOCAL NEWS

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Hercules land bought, to remain open space

Franklin Canyon property had been slated for houses and hotel before voters rejected plan in 2004

By Denis Cuff

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Six years after Hercules voters rejected plans for 500 homes and a hotel on slopes east of town, a conservation group has purchased the 483-acre Franklin Canyon property as permanent open space for wildlife habitat and public hiking and riding trails.

The Muir Heritage Land Trust, a Contra Costa-based group that buys and manages natural lands, announced Wednesday that it met a deadline last Saturday to raise the \$2.6 million purchase price with contributions from government, foundations and private donors. The sale closed Friday.

The land, purchased from a group of investors, is on rolling hills and ridges visible from High-

way 4 above the Franklin Canyon Golf Course between Martinez and Hercules.

Raising the money in these economic hard times wasn't easy.

A fundraising drive in the spring pushed the land trust over the top, giving the nonprofit group enough to buy the property and create a \$500,000 stewardship reserve fund to care for both the Franklin Canyon property and the adjacent 702-acre Fernandez Ranch open space. Some of the money also goes toward buying the 23-acre Acalanes Ridge property in Lafayette.

More than 1,000 donors gave more than \$108,000 in the spring, including many who mailed in \$1 and \$5 bills wrapped around handwritten notes, said Linus Eukel, the land trust's executive director.

"Those handwritten notes were very meaningful to us, and those many donations were very important in demonstrating there was strong local support for preserving this land," Eukel said. "If we

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Franklin Canyon property

The Muir Heritage Land Trust has purchased 483 acres once proposed to be the site of 500 homes, a hotel and shops.



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had just gone to the agencies and foundations with our hands out and asked for the entire amount, I doubt we would have gotten the same result."

The fundraising drive was kicked off and championed in columns in this newspaper written by Gary Bogue.

Government made the largest contribution toward the land buy. The state Coastal Conservancy and the East Bay Regional Park District each contributed \$1 million last month. The park district money came from a regional park bond measure East Bay voters approved in 2008, as did another \$200,000 that the Hercules City Council approved last week.

When open to the public

next year, the Franklin Canyon property will have miles of trails, including a new section of the Bay Area Ridge Trail that will be perhaps a mile long, Eukel said.

Developers drew up several building plans for the Franklin Canyon property over 20 years. The last one for 500 homes proposed by the GreenPark developers was rejected by voters in 2004.