



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/STAFF

LINUS EUKEL, right, executive director of the Muir Heritage Land Trust, takes Times reporter Denis Cuff on a tour of 400 acres in the Franklin Canyon area.

Open space to stay that way



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/TIMES

A WESTERN FENCE LIZARD makes itself at home, and will have 400 acres of open space to roam near Franklin Canyon.

Land trust to take over 423 acres in Hercules that had been targeted by developer

By Denis Cuff
STAFF WRITER

A conservation group is buying 423 acres of Franklin Canyon land in Hercules where local residents voted in 2004 to block a developer's plans for 500 proposed homes, a hotel and shops.

Bringing to a close one of Contra Costa's longest struggles over development versus preservation, the Martinez-based Muir Heritage Land Trust will announce today that it has negotiated a sales agreement to buy the land for \$1.8 million from a group of investors.

Muir, a nonprofit group, has two years to raise the money through contributions and grants.

The Franklin Canyon land has grasslands and oak for-

ests on hills as high as 775 feet with sweeping views of San Francisco Bay.

Hiking and riding trails will be established there, but no development will be allowed.

"This is a happy ending to a long and arduous process and debate over this land that has lasted more than 20 years," said Linus Eukel, the Muir Land Trust's executive director. "This purchase will not only protect a fragile ecosystem, significant watershed and key public trail alignments, it will permanently preserve important habitat for special-status species."

The purchase will enlarge the swath of protected open land between Hercules and Martinez that is owned by the land trust, which already has the 702-acre Fernandez Ranch, and the East Bay Regional Park District.

It also will provide land for another segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail and other links to trails between Orinda, Martinez and Her-

cules.

"When you drive along Highway 4, you look up and see a great corridor of hills," said Steve Kirby, who helped write the Hercules ballot measure that blocked the proposed 500-home GreenPark development. "It would have been very disappointing to see this developed."

The GreenPark developers wanted to grade hills extensively and remove more than 3,000 trees on 483 acres. Passage of Measure M by 63 percent of Hercules voters stopped the project.

Now the land trust is buying all but 60 of those acres from a group of investors, including Vincent Tai, Eukel said.

The investors who owned the property declined to discuss plans for the remaining 60 acres. Eukel noted, however, that Measure M restricts building to only one home per 40 acres in that area.

The Muir Land Trust

See FRANKLIN, Page 4

Franklin

FROM PAGE 3

plans to kick off its fundraising dinner for the Franklin Canyon property with its Fresh Airé Affaire from 5 to 9 p.m. Aug. 16 at the John Muir National Historic Site on Alhambra Avenue in Martinez. For more information, visit www.muirheritage-landtrust.org.

The land trust aims to raise \$2.5 million for the

project, including \$1.8 million for the land and another \$700,000 for transaction costs and an endowment to pay for maintenance and restoration.

Muir is trying to raise another \$6 million over five years to buy other open space in Contra Costa County.

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