

Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy is adding its missing link

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

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A hiker strolls up the McBride Trail which borders the top of the Filiorum Parcel. The Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy is finally in position to acquire the last piece that will connect the Peninsula land reserve. (Steve McCrank / Staff Photographer)

More than 20 years ago, the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy was founded with the goal of preventing development on brush-covered hillsides that offer stunning views of the Pacific Ocean and the curving coastline.

Even as the conservancy's profile rose and it came to manage nearly 1,400 acres on The Hill, one of the most prized pieces of land remained out of reach.

Over the years, the envisioned preserve - almost 200 acres known as the Upper Filiorum - gained a distinction as the missing link in the patchwork of open space on the Peninsula.

Meanwhile, negotiations with the conservancy, the city of Rancho Palos Verdes and the property's owners repeatedly fell apart. Fences with "No Trespassing" signs were erected, preventing hikers from crossing the hillsides.

"It has one of the most beautiful views in the world and sooner or later somebody was going to figure out how to develop it," said Bill Ailor, conservancy president emeritus.

"It's taken us 20 years and that whole area has been our highest priority for that entire time," Ailor added. "When we started the conservancy in 1988, some people thought we were nuts, that we could never pull it off."

Now, with a new deal in place and the approval of a major grant from the state Coastal Conservancy, the acquisition is almost complete.

It's a culminating achievement for the local nonprofit, which Ailor founded as a tiny group with the longshot goal of preserving the land below McBride Trail, which runs along the top of the Filiorum area.

"We've been through a roller-coaster ride on this one. All of sudden it happened," said conservancy development director Bob Ford. "It's been worth the wait."

Today, all that stands between the conservancy and the Upper Filiorum is three months and \$400,000.

The organization must raise that amount by Dec. 31 to close escrow on the \$6.5 million property, which is owned by York Long Point Associates, a group managed by Rolling Hills Estates developer Jim York. Former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan is the chief investor in the group, York said.

Last week, the Coastal Conservancy approved a grant of \$5.5 million for the purchase. The money comes from Proposition 84, a 2006 state measure that funds acquisitions for conservation and flood control projects.

Rancho Palos Verdes is planning to contribute \$650,000 toward the deal. About a third of that will come from state and county grants, while the majority will be from the city's capital improvement reserves.

Los Angeles County is also expected to kick in \$50,000.

The deal will give ownership of 161 acres to Rancho Palos Verdes, which was founded in 1973 with the goal of restricting coastal development. The land will be added to the city's 1,200-acre, conservancy-managed Palos Verdes Nature Preserve.

The conservancy has not yet documented the land's plants and animals, but it's a known site of coastal sage scrub, a plant community that has been devastated by development. Foxes have been spotted on the property as well.

Councilman Doug Stern, who negotiated the acquisition for the city and was once a conservancy board member, touted the significance of the land as a habitat link with the Three Sisters Reserve and the Portuguese Bend and Forrestal reserves.

All together, the city will control about 952 contiguous acres, an area larger than New York's Central Park.

"We've achieved something quite honestly most communities can't achieve. We've preserved a lot of open space for everyone," Stern said. "I think they'll look back many decades from now and say, 'Those people had it right.'"

As part of the deal, York's group has agreed to donate another 30 acres, designed to mitigate habitat impacts from its long-planned residential development next to the Upper Filiorum.

That project - on 27 acres referred to as the Plumtree property - remains mired in planning complications.

Some residents have worried that the Upper Filiorum deal would force the city to approve the project, but Stern and other city officials have insisted there will be "no quid pro quo."

Others in Rancho Palos Verdes have been critical of the city's close relationship with the conservancy and have questioned the use of public money to acquire the land.

The 315-acre Filiorum property was originally owned by the family of Frank Vanderlip, the developer of Palos Verdes Estates, who at one point controlled most of the Peninsula. In 1988, the land was bought by Arizona-based Monaghan Co. along with the site of Marineland of the Pacific.

After Monaghan defaulted on a loan from a bank that had fallen in the savings and loan crisis, the federal government auctioned off the Filiorum and Long Point parcels in 1994. York's group was the lucky winner.

Jim York said he had always envisioned preserving the upper portion of the Filiorum as open space. Less than half of the land is zoned for residential use, according to city planners.

York said he's pleased with the deal, though it brings in less than the \$9.2 million agreement that fell apart last year.

"Until it closes, I'm not going to count on it being a done deal. We've been through this before," York said.

Over the next three months, the conservancy will launch into high gear with a fundraising campaign.

On Friday, the nonprofit held the first meeting of a new capital campaign committee, Ford said.

The campaign goal - still undetermined - will be well above the \$400,000 needed for the Upper Filiorum property.

That's because the nonprofit is still figuring out how to recover from a devastating 230-acre fire in August that blackened much of the Portuguese Bend Reserve, which remains closed. The cost of reseeded and stabilizing the scorched land is still being calculated, Ford said. Ongoing operating costs are another concern.

The hobbled economy has reduced giving to nonprofits, but conservancy representatives said they believe residents will come through because of the nature of the Upper Filliorum.

"We think the community, knowing this is the last link, will be very supportive this time around," conservancy board President Henry Jurgens said.

How to help

What: The Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy is raising money for the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve Acquisition and Restoration Fund.

Why: The conservancy is set to help purchase the final piece in a patchwork nature preserve, which is recovering from a 230-acre fire in August.

Where: Contributions at www.pvplc.org or sent to PVPLC, P.O. Box 3427, Rolling Hills Estates, CA 90274.

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