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The last piece of the Peninsula puzzle

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

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Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy board members, left to right, Bill Swank, Henry Jurgens and Bill Ailor survey the "Upper Filiorum." (Robert Casillas Staff Photographer)

It took more than two decades of coaxing, coddling, wheedling, needling, lawyering and paper-pushing to get the deal done.

Now, prompted by an unfaltering dream, the puzzle is finally complete.

Rancho Palos Verdes and a local land conservancy have completed the complex, repeatedly delayed \$6.5 million purchase of almost 200 acres of open space known as the Upper Filiorum.

The agreement, finalized last week, slots into place a missing piece of land that bridges previously acquired city nature reserves, linking a broad expanse of more than 950 acres that stretch across the southern face of the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

Together, the contiguous, conservancy-managed reserve is now larger than New York's Central Park. Not bad for a city of about 45,000 residents.

"It's amazing to me. I'm blown away," said Bill Ailor, who founded the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy in 1988 with the vision of preserving this very land.

"I remember when we used to work on that property, imagine what the future held for it - and that was development," Ailor said.

With negotiations continuing nearly until the end-of-year deadline, escrow closed Wednesday.

Some 500 donors, many of them first-time contributors, gave money toward the conservancy's \$400,000 portion of the bill.

The city, incorporated in 1973 with the goal of slowing coastal development, spent \$600,000. A \$5.5 million California Coastal Conservancy grant, from a voter-approved water quality bond, paid the majority.

"It's a huge public asset that will become even

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more and more valuable as L.A. becomes more and more congested and people realize you have to drive hundreds of miles to get to any public open space," said Councilman Doug Stern, a former conservancy board member.

"And it's not just open space, it's space with some of the most magnificent views in California or even the country," Stern said.

A mix of steep



(Paul Penzella/Staff Artist)

hills and bowl-like, flatter areas, the land is covered in grasses and coastal sage scrub, a plant community that's been reduced by more than two-thirds because of development.

In the middle, a knoll called Jack's Hat offers a prime spot to "sit and contemplate," Ailor said.

The land was transferred to the city from a group of investors that includes local developer Jim York and former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan.

Previous agreements with the group fell apart in recent years, and the city and conservancy had struggled to line up the funding at the right time.

York, who has been through many negotiation sessions with the city and the conservancy since acquiring hundreds of acres of undeveloped land in 1994, lauded the deal.

"This is a win for everybody involved," York said. "It finally completes the missing link."

The acquisition includes 161 acres purchased outright and another 30 acres donated by York to offset the environmental impacts of a residential development he hopes to one day build.

York said he intends to submit plans to the city this year for the project, which would be erected on 27 acres known as the Plumtree property, next to the Upper Filiorum - bound to be a controversial development.

That possibility seemed a distant complication to supporters of the expansion of the city's now nearly 1,400-acre Palos Verdes Nature Preserve.

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On New Year's Eve, some of the conservancy's chief negotiators met on an easement off Pacifica Drive that leads to the Upper Filiorum. They grinned, shook hands and congratulated one another, walking onto the property.

A coastline laced with morning mist spread out before them, the sunlight reflecting off the sea.

The "No Trespassing" signs were gone. Wire fences, which long prevented both hikers and wildlife from crossing the sloping land, had been taken down.

"This parcel was why the organization was founded in 1988. It's always been in our sights. This is culmination of what we started," said conservancy President Henry Jurgens.

Ailor said he led the conservancy's first hike there, some 20 years ago. Three hundred people showed up.

"I didn't know about plants and animals, but I would talk about the politics," he said.

Despite the interest from local residents, it took years for the conservancy to build credibility.

"When we first started, nobody thought we could raise enough money to acquire land," Ailor said.

With its long-desired acquisitions complete, the conservancy will now enter a new phase, Executive Director Andrea Vona said.

The organization is still raising money toward its \$1 million goal for both the Upper Filiorum purchase and fire restoration work in the Portuguese Bend Reserve. Donations can be made at www.pvplc.org.

But now the focus will be on habitat management, restoration and education.

"This is a great way to start 2010," Vona said.

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