

Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2009

Editorial: One Cherry we really ought to pick

Opportunity to preserve coastal land merits outlay by county even amid belt tightening

For months, San Luis Obispo County officials have been warning us to brace for extreme budget cuts — including the loss of as many as 400 staff positions over the coming years. Given the dire circumstances, this may seem like the worst possible time for the county to spend \$500,000 to help acquire parkland.

What's more, the property in question — Wild Cherry Canyon, which also has been known as Avila Ranch — wouldn't be controlled by the county, but rather, would come under the state park system.

Despite the woeful economy and all its impact locally, we believe that the county should take advantage of this rare opportunity to help ensure the acquisition of a magnificent, 2,400-acre stretch of near pristine coastal property — land that would become part of Montaña de Oro State Park. We strongly urge the county Parks and Recreation Commission and the Board of Supervisors to approve the expenditure.

There is some urgency to the request. The American Land Conservancy is spearheading this effort, and its option to acquire the property for \$24 million expires in June.

The conservancy already has \$21 million committed to the project — most of that in state funding — and has only \$3 million left to raise.

If the county could help make that happen by investing \$500,000, that would be a bargain.

Montaña de Oro is one of the most popular of all state parks, drawing nearly 1 million visitors per year. Expanding it to Avila Beach would undoubtedly bring more visitors — and ecotourism dollars — to our county.

Another plus: State parks would be responsible for maintenance and operations. That's good, because the county has made it clear that it can't afford to operate any new parks.

But here's what sold us on the proposal: The \$500,000 is already available, in a fund that holds park fees paid by residential developers. This money is earmarked for park development and park acquisitions, so even if the county wanted to use the money to hire sheriff's deputies or pave roads or purchase fire engines, it couldn't do it.

By contributing to the project, the county will demonstrate that there is strong local support for the project — and that may very well encourage other grants and donations that will help the American Land Conservancy down this final stretch.

Wild Cherry Canyon is a magnificent, undeveloped stretch of coastal property — a resource that is becoming increasingly rare in California. This is our chance to help preserve this land for future generations. It would be a shame to squander it.