

## **Board to consider expanding Montaña de Oro State Park to Avila Beach**

**By: David Sneed**

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County supervisors on Tuesday will consider whether to allocate \$500,000 in development fee revenue for the effort to expand Montaña de Oro State Park to Avila Beach.

The American Land Conservancy is in the final stages of an effort to raise \$24 million to conserve a 2,400-acre property northwest of Avila Beach called Wild Cherry Canyon.

Once conserved, the land would be turned over to the State Parks Department. The acquisition would make Montaña de Oro one of the largest state parks in the system and allow the dedication of a 20-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail from Los Osos to Avila Beach.

The county's contribution would come from a fund developers pay into when their residential projects are approved. The fund has almost \$1 million, said Pete Jenny, retiring county deputy parks director.

The conservancy has until the end of the year to raise the needed funds. About \$22 million has already been committed to the project, including nearly \$1 million from the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The effort to expand the park enjoys broad public support, but similar recent hearings have drawn members of the public who question the wisdom of expanding state park holdings in the county when the state cannot afford to keep open the ones it already has.

Entrance fees have already increased and state parks managers may have to close as many as 100 of the state's 279 parks after Labor Day.

County parks officials say there are several compelling reasons to spend the money in this way.

First, fees paid into the parks fund must be allocated within five years. Funds in the parks accounts have been there for three years already and would have to be returned to the developers if not used.

"We can't indefinitely sit on this money," Jenny said. "The idea is to put it to use as soon as we can."

Second, opportunities to significantly add to the parks system are once-in-a-lifetime events while budget shortfalls are temporary events.

"This is a tremendous bargain for us," Jenny said. "There is no Plan B on how to connect Montaña de Oro to the Avila area."

The hearing is scheduled to take place after the board's lunch break. Four of the five supervisors will have to approve the allocation.

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