

Montaña de Oro may add Wild Cherry Canyon

Posted on Tue, Apr. 27, 2010

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The higher elevations of the Wild Cherry Canyon property offer ocean views from Montaña de Oro to Point Sal on a clear day. -- By Joe Johnston

Slumping real estate prices in San Luis Obispo County have resulted in one benefit. The assessed value of 2,400 acres of proposed parkland behind Avila Beach has dropped to the point that conservationists now think they have enough money to buy the property.

Once acquired, the land will be turned over to State Parks to be added to Montaña de Oro State Park, making the park one of the most expansive in the state's inventory. At more than 8,000 acres now, Montaña de Oro will grow to about 13,500 acres.

Avila Ranch, also known as Wild Cherry

Canyon, will be added to other smaller parcels that have already been acquired to total more than 5,500 acres of new parkland.

"We have succeeded in reaching our conservation goals," said Kara Blakeslee, a local activist with the American Land Conservancy who is heading the conservation effort. "We are now trying to complete the political process."

That political process consists of urging two state boards to actually allocate the money they pledged for the purchase of the land. On May 27, the Wildlife Conservation Board will vote whether to allocate \$6 million for the purchase.

Blakeslee is organizing a van to take local supporters to Sacramento and back to attend the May 27 meeting. The state Public Works Board must also approve the transfer of the land to the state. No date for that hearing has been set, yet, Blakeslee said.

Originally, the price for the Wild Cherry Canyon property was set at \$24 million. A variety of state agencies are providing the bulk of that money using funds approved by voters in a series of land conservation ballot initiatives.

However, there was a shortfall of some \$1.4 million that the American Land Conservancy was working to raise via private contributions. A new assessment of the value of the property is under way and is indicating that the price of the land has fallen enough to erase the deficit, Blakeslee said. The exact amount of the final assessment has not been determined.

Once the land is acquired, Montaña de Oro will grow by 65 percent and will extend from Los Osos to Avila Beach. A new 20-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail spanning the park is planned. Other agencies that have contributed money to the acquisition include the Coastal Conservancy, State Parks, the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the county Board of Supervisors.

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