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Wagner Ranch Nature Area Obtains Protections through Non-Profit Status

By Jennifer Wake



Naturalist Toris Jaeger talking to Wagner Ranch Kindergarteners Photo Andy Scheck

After a long battle culminating over whether to move a maintenance facility onto a two-acre parcel in a remote corner of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area - one of the more pristine areas of the 16.5 acre open space - the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area (FWRNA) obtained non-profit status last month in support for this historic educational site.

FWRNA President Steve Gentry sees it as a win-win situation. The non-profit status will help to open doors for grants, allowing for more upgrades and access to the Nature Area, and better educational opportunities for the third, fourth, and fifth graders who currently go through the system each year. "The District did us a great favor: they made us shore up and protect Wagner Ranch," Gentry says.

The push to get control of the Nature Area started when Gentry and other FWRNA board members read a newspaper article nearly four years ago about the Orinda School Board's plans to sell Pine Grove Hill to Pulte Homes and to move the District's maintenance yard to the Nature Area.

"When a bunch of us read that, we were floored," Gentry says. "They were going to put a maintenance building on what we thought was a jewel. You can't build a maintenance yard and call it a nature area."

Gentry decided to use his truck in Orinda's annual 4th of July parade to spread the word, while he and other FWRNA members, including Orinda naturalist Toris Jaeger, Ron and Rosemary Clendenen and Reg and Kathy Barrett, put together a paper petition entitled "Save Wagner Ranch."

"We got 1,200 names in four to five hours," says Gentry, who thought 400 names would be good. "The Barretts and a bunch of others pumped the number up to 1,400."

Unfortunately, the then Orinda Union School District (OUSD) superintendent Frank Brunetti was less than impressed, Gentry says. "We ran into this bureaucracy and a lot of bitterness was created. We want to put a smile on kids' faces when they go through the OUSD system. The benefit of Wagner Ranch Nature Area is the hands-on tactile experience."

Since then, thanks to volunteer efforts throughout Orinda, putting a maintenance yard at the Nature Area is now, hopefully, off the table.

On July 29, the OUSD presented a feasibility study conducted by Total School Solutions to evaluate the possible operation of the District maintenance unit without reliance on a shop facility. The study recommended discontinuing some services, consolidating materials, and moving to a smaller facility.

Although a good sign for the FWRNA, Gentry hopes to go one step further: get conservation rights for the property. "To be able to control the property, you have to own something," he says. "Conservation rights would keep the property in situ."

For now, the FWRNA are going forward with plans to upgrade the Nature Area, including trail improvements, adding a new kitchen and overhead, bringing in a 1,500 lb. barbecue, starting a docent walk, and raising money to buy a pre-fabricated bathroom for the site. "We've got permission and know where we're going, thanks to the new superintendent Joe Jaconette," Gentry says.

With all the changes, Gentry keeps one goal in mind: "To educate children and get them dirty at the same time."

Reach the reporter at: jennifer@lamorindaweekly.com

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