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Orindans Come Out in Support of the Wagner Ranch Nature Center, Again

By Andrea A. Firth



The 5th grade Cub Scout Den 7 (Senior Webelos), Pack 212 from Wagner Ranch Elementary School recently completed our conservation project of building Mason Bee nesting boxes around the Wagner Ranch Nature Area in an effort to help reverse the decline of the bee population. Pictured are the Cub Scouts along with naturalist Toris Jaeger and Friends of Wagner Ranch Nature Area president Steve Gentry.

It was déjà vu at the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Governing Board meeting on Monday, March 9.

Over twenty individuals, including parents, teachers and students, addressed the Board over the course of almost an hour of public comment to express their avid support for the outdoor environmental education program at the Wagner Ranch Nature Center and their dismay that that the District Naturalist position is among one of the top budget reductions slated for the next school year.

At the previous regular Board meeting held in early February, over 25 individuals had addressed the Board strongly encouraging them to reconsider the placement of the Naturalist position so high on the cut list.

Several parents passionately expressed the profound impact the Nature Center experience had on their children. One father, who took time off work to attend the meeting, eloquently described the sense of inquiry, wonderment, and inspiration about science, nature, and the outdoors that the environmental education program had instilled in his child.

Support for the program was paralleled by the support for OUSD's longtime and well-loved District Naturalist, Toris Jaeger.

"She is environmental education in Orinda," stated one parent.

An environmental science teacher from Miramonte High School expressed her amazement at the number of her high school students who shared stories about the Nature Center program and Jaeger. And a few Orinda natives recalled their

own positive memories of going to the Nature Center and being taught by Jaeger and expressed their desire to have the same experience for their own children.

Parent Christy Blackie-Taylor also presented the Board with a plan to generate funds to help support the Nature Center.

When the votes were counted, however, the Naturalist position remained on the A-list for OUSD budget reductions, and continuing the Nature Center environmental education program as currently delivered remained in jeopardy.

In following up with OUSD Board President Riki Sorenson after the meeting, she noted that the District's Leadership Team (comprised of the Superintendent, Curriculum Director, and principals) and staff prioritized three areas for reduction in the budgeting process - computers, libraries and the environmental education program.

"The Board is committed to keeping libraries open, computers working, and the Nature Center open to students," stated Sorenson. "How we will do that is not yet known, but we have to make some changes. We are going to continue to look at all three programs to see how we can deliver them more cost-effectively."

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