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Still No Answers Regarding WRNA from OUSD

By Lucy Amaral



SEE members continued to have Orinda residents sign petitions and discuss ways to keep Wagner Ranch Nature Area open at the recent Orinda Wildlife Festival Photo Jennifer Wake

For the third month in a row, parents of Orinda school children, teachers, and citizens came to the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Board of Trustees meeting, asking the board to preserve Environmental Education programs at Wagner Ranch Nature Area (WRNA) and remove the naturalist position from the 2009/2010 budget hit list.

More than 30 individuals spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting held on April 13 at Glorietta Elementary School. For over an hour, they asked, pleaded, cajoled, informed, bargained, voiced disappointment and at times used humor to impress upon the board the importance of the Environmental Education program, the necessity to keep the naturalist, Toris Jaeger, and the innate value of the WRNA.

Riki Sorenson, OUSD Board President, said no official discussion or decision about the WRNA was scheduled, nor were budget cut specifics on the agenda for the evening.

According to an April 15 OUSD budget update, in February, the board identified \$1.4 million in potential cuts for the coming school year. With the passage of Measure B, several items were restored that had been slated for reduction or elimination. Measure B did not, however, cover all the funding shortages, and elementary school librarians, computer teachers and the district naturalist, among other cuts, stayed on the list.

A group of Orinda parents recently formed Save Environmental Education (SEE) in an effort to save the naturalist position and the programs held at WRNA.

SEE, along with the nonprofit organization Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, comprised most of the attendees at the April 13 meeting.

Bekki Van Voorhis-Gilbert, a founding member of SEE, said that two proposals have been submitted by SEE to the board, and that a third proposal is being developed, each designed to maintain the WRNA and Naturalist. However, she voiced frustration because she felt the board has been "unresponsive to both input and solutions," but added, "We remain hopeful that we can save this truly unique program."

"This is not a program to get rid of, even in troubled times," Van Voorhis-Gilbert told the board during the meeting. "This is a huge part of our community. We ask of you today for a commitment from this school board and OUSD to work with us to figure out a way to keep this program in place and whether it means finding alternatives to funding or slightly modified curriculum, we want to keep this program, the district naturalist and we want to work with you."

Sorenson said that the budgeting process, especially in this difficult financial time, has been long, slow and "heartbreaking." Sorenson said that the district leadership team, comprised of school site principals, associate principals, district directors and the superintendent, is currently developing myriad options for all areas. Those options will filter through the coordinating council, curriculum committee and site faculties before being presented to the board. "We don't know what the final budget will be but we are looking at all options to maintain as many programs as possible."

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