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Volunteers take on the restoration of Mulholland Ridge

By *Sophie Braccini*



Volunteers pulling brooms at Mulholland Ridge in Moraga Photo provided

For several years now former Moraga Mayor and Town Council member Lynda Deschambault has taken on the cleanup of the Mulholland Ridge open space area from invasive plants with groups of volunteers.

What started as a one- or two-person effort is now a group project involving local adults and students who enjoy contributing their time to the community. From the town's perspective, Mulholland needs to serve as a defensive fire space between Moraga and Orinda, and the mandatory nature of the official plans for the future of the open space preserve is unclear.

Deschambault has been a champion for open space since she ran for council in 2004. She says that Mulholland is the reason why she put an offer on a house in Moraga: It's a hike in her backyard.

When she was on the council, the town conducted an environmental study of the park and received a Mulholland Habitat Preservation and Restoration Plan. She remembers that the environmental report was approved, but it is not clear if the town voted to accept the restoration plan that includes removal of nonnative plants and restoration of natural habitat in the 250-acre open space area along Donald Drive. Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram is not sure either about the mandatory nature of the plan.

For Ingram, the first priority up there is fire safety. Last year the town received a grant from Diablo FireSafe Council; the first year the money was used to clear up the eucalyptus grove behind the Hacienda de las Flores, and this year the director is electing to widen the fire buffer between Moraga and Orinda by having weeds cut on each side of the road that runs along the ridge, including coyote brush. He adds that a biologist is working with the town so nesting sites would not be disturbed.

Deschambault's priority is different: She wants invasive plants such as thistles and French brooms to be removed while natives, such as coyote brush, should be preserved as they serve the natural cycles. She says that the restoration plan that was defined in 2007 with expert Moraga volunteers such as Malcolm Sproul and Gail DeLala list the plants and animal species present on this natural piece of property and recommend that nothing else but plant restoration be done there.

Moraga Town Council Member Jeanette Fritsky is one of the volunteers helping Deschambault and explains that it takes training to identify the different plants. She adds that it's better to leave the cleanup to trained volunteers.

Fritsky secured weed wrenches from EBMUD to supplement the tools given to the volunteers by the town the first two Sundays in January and February when they started the work. She also talked to Campolindo High School Advanced Placement environmental science teacher Tren Kauzer and some students will come to help on March 26, the last day of cleanup.

Ingram adds that volunteer support is crucial in Moraga and that there are more projects residents can help with. They can contact Moraga Parks and Recreation Department at (925) 376-2520 if they want to get involved.

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