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A campaign to preserve Painted Rock

By Sophie Braccini

Views from Painted Rock property. Photo provided

Piece by piece, the John Muir Land Trust is weaving a tapestry of protected open space throughout the East Bay, slowly expanding amongst the hills and between developments to preserve the local wildlife and its habitats. The new patch of land that was recently added to this network is not huge, but it is significant and strategically connected. On Sept. 5 the trust announced the start of the campaign to save Painted Rock in Moraga. After Carr Ranch two years ago at the eastern boundaries of the town, this time it is right in the middle of town that a door will be opened to access 500 acres and more of connected wild habitat.

Looming over the town like a rogue billboard, the Painted Rock property gets its name from the long tradition that has sent hundreds of Campolindo High School students genially trespassing up the hill with cans of spray paint to script outrageous, funny and sometimes touc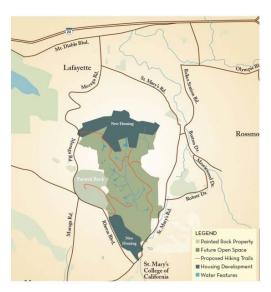hing messages on the big round rock overlooking the intersection of Moraga Road and Rheem Boulevard. It was Roger Poynt's property, a resident who died unexpectedly four years ago, abandoning forever the plans he had made for the development of his dreams. His widow has agreed to sell the 84-acre hill to the JMLT for $2 million.

Peggy Cabaniss, a JMLT board member and Moraga resident for over 40 years, explains that this acquisition is part of a strategy to keep Moraga a special community with access to pristine open space. Linus Eukel, the trust's executive director, adds that this specific piece of property shares boundaries with the Palos Colorados and Rancho Laguna properties, each with vast expanses of preserved open space and planned trails. He explains that the JMLT will start working on a trail plan and appeal for volunteers to carve it. He expects the preserve to open to the public in the spring of 2020. If all goes according to plan, Painted Rock will be a free recreation resource, opening a portal to miles of multiuse trails, ponds, streams, windswept grasslands, unparalleled views of Mount Diablo and the rolling hills of central Contra Costa, all within a few minutes walk from homes in the heart of Lamorinda.

But before the deed is done, the trust needs to raise the money it has promised. The $2 million purchase price is due May 31. Eukel explains that half of the money has already been raised, thanks to generous donors from Moraga, Lafayette, Orinda and beyond. Cabaniss adds that members of the Moraga community had already been giving money to JMLT, but that the recent acquisitions of Carr Ranch, and now of Painted Rock have ignited their interest and generosity.

Eukel is sensitive to the fact that the Bay Area is under tremendous pressure for more housing. He describes how Marin County started undertaking the task of preserving its open space long ago and that now 75 percent of the land is protected, concentrating housing in the more urban downtown areas. He adds that Contra Costa and Alameda counties are still far from reaching a level that he feels is necessary for the sustainability of the local fauna and flora, including wildlife corridors, but that the trust, treading tenaciously on the footstep of its namesake, is proud to contribute to what he calls a moral duty to the future generations of Californians.

"Other than cattle ranchers who have grazed herds on these hills for decades, few people - even longtime residents who drive by daily on busy streets below - have experienced this beautiful landscape or enjoyed its remarkable vistas," notes Eukel. The JMLT has already acquired over 3,000 acres of open space in Contra Costa County. Contributions to the Painted Rock campaign can be directed to jmlt.org; the trust will be present at the Moraga Pear and Wine festival on Sept. 22.

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