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## Orinda School Board asks legislature for grant to preserve and protect nature area

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda Union School District board of trustees voted at its April 19 special meeting to ask Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan to seek funding from the governor's office to be allocated from the state's 2022-23 budget for the express purpose of preserving and protecting the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. The matter was brought to the board by OUSD Superintendent Aida Glimme. The exact amount to be asked for has yet to be determined, but would be in the region of \$5 million or more.

The Wagner Ranch Nature Area, as it is currently known, covers an area of approximately 19 acres adjacent to Wagner Ranch Elementary School, but it is considered to be a sixth OUSD campus, where students from all of the other elementary schools in the district receive outdoor education. Fully owned by OUSD, the area features meadows, forest, ponds and streams and is a certified as a Schoolyard Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. The area is bordered on one side by the San Pablo Creek, home to thousands of native plants and animals.

Throughout the year, OUSD students take part in field trips and hands-on experiential educational opportunities in the nature area, including summer camps. The district is looking toward expanding opportunities to avail of the nature area to middle school students and to students from other districts. District staff was informed of the opportunity to submit a request for funding and protection of the nature area. State funds may only be used for such projects, and may not be used to improve school facilities, to secure services for students, (such as mental health support), or for staff salaries.

The proposed request would be to protect an area of roughly 15 acres and to designate that area as open space. In exchange for the funds, the designated portion of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area would be permanently preserved as protected, deed-restricted open space lands and would not be subject to potential future construction or development by OUSD or others. All of the land would remain wholly under the ownership of OUSD.

The board looked at a proposed budget request of about \$4.5 million, which would provide funds for a visitor/education center, a bathroom, pathways compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, an outdoor education coordinator and educators for five years, nature path signage and displays, an outdoor kitchen, an outdoor classroom, fencing, a shade canopy and a garden upgrade.

Board member Liz Daoust explained that the request has to happen by the end of April. Board President Carol Brown queried whether the board is expecting the state to compensate OUSD for the full value of the land. She expressed her concerns that the board might be encumbering too much property.

Board member Jason Kaune agreed that the nature area is very valuable property and this request is for all time. He said that he would like to explore a land trust for the open space property and felt that the board should not look at this grant as compensation for the land. Board member Cara Hoxley worried about the large area encumbered and Kaune suggested, "If we can't do the land trust, we have to evaluate all our options."

In public comments, Erica Bains spoke on behalf of the Friends of the Orinda Nature Area, recently renamed from the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. Bains said that since 2000 when the Friends formed a 501(c)(3), they have had the mission of preserving and maintaining the historical nature area, and have stepped in to ensure the continued operation of the area as an educational site. Saying that the Friends stand committed to the area and offering their help, the Friends urged the board to agree that the majority of the nature area be conserved as protected open space, and that buildings should only be considered to the extent absolutely necessary for the economic and educational viability of the space.

Glimme told the board that there are two clear next steps: to conduct a survey and to review the budget and make sure the request is realistic, which is being undertaken by OUSD Director of Facilities, Stuart House.

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