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Outcry grows as downed trees keep Orinda Nature Area shuttered

By Sora O'Doherty



Trees damaged by winter storms pose a safety risk at the Orinda Nature Area. Photo Sora O'Doherty

constructed within the Nature Area by Eagle Scouts, and the Scouts continue to be interested in helping with future improvements.

Unfortunately, the council told the students that the nature area is not under its jurisdiction, but Vice Mayor Darlene Gee, who was presiding in the excused absence of Mayor Inga Miller, promised to work with the Orinda Union School District in their 2 x 2 subcommittee to see what can be done.

The Nature Area is owned by OUSD, but has been maintained by the Friends of the Nature Area. OUSD Superintendent Aida Glimme says that there is no fund in the OUSD budget for the nature area, and she is loath to take funds from classrooms, teachers, or other school facilities for maintenance of the Nature Area. However, she says that the district can and will accept any donations, which can be earmarked for the Nature Area.

The volunteers had begun a GoFundMe campaign, but had to take it down as the Nature Area was closed. However, if part of the area is reopened, they do plan to start another GoFundMe campaign. OUSD is also looking at grant possibilities.

Council Member Latika Malkani said she was "really impressed and very happy" to see individuals standing up for what is important to them at the meeting.

Council Member Brandyn Iverson agreed that the matter is on the agenda for the 2 x 2 meeting, adding that while everyone wants to get the nature area reopened, there are great concerns about the safety of people on the property at this time.

Glimme later spoke to the Lamorinda Weekly, and gave this reporter a tour of the area after she had consulted with an arborist concerning the safety and fate of the trees on the 18-acre parcel that is owned the the OUSD. A rough estimate of the cost of making the entire area safe stands at a quarter- to a half-million dollars. However, the district is hoping to proceed by addressing one area at a time, starting with reopening the garden area where volunteers used to convene each Sunday to work on raising plants both for food and for replacing plants in the nature area. This area is fenced off, so by trimming the trees to remove dead branches it can be made safe for occupation.

Last week Glimme conveyed to the Friends of the Nature Area that the estimate for making the garden portion of the property safe for volunteers as well as the Wagner Ranch Elementary School Garden, which provides access to the Nature Area, was \$27,500. Although it is uncertain whether there will be any funds available in the OUSD budget, the Friends have decided to commence a fundraising effort in conjunction with the Wagner Ranch Elementary School Garden Advocates.

The Wagner Ranch Garden, which has also been closed since the last storms, is especially critical for the Special Education children, according to Gina Gabriel, one of the parent advocates. One child with a severe disability has been pointing at the garden area every time he is nearby, so the Wagner Ranch Garden parent advocates are eager to have the school garden reopened.

A group of young volunteers who feel passionately about the Orinda Nature Area attended the Orinda City Council meeting on June 20 looking for help to restore the battered area, that has been completely closed since early March. The effects of several years of drought followed by a winter of strong storms have wreaked havoc on the Nature Area. Some of the huge old oaks have fallen. Some trees are leaning dangerously, many resting on other trees and endangering them as well. While the huge eucalyptus trees appear healthy, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, which does work on the property to reduce the risk of wild fires, would like to see them go. Monterrey pines are beyond their life span and are being removed all over Lamorinda in an effort to improve fire safety.

Speaking for the group of volunteers, Elsa Cooke said that there are many dedicated volunteers ready to help restore the Nature Area when they are permitted to do so. Over the years, there have been numerous projects

The next area could be the kitchen area, however it is not fenced off from the remainder of the nature area, so that might present a difficulty.

Theodore Wagner was a surveyor general for the state of California. Wagner bought 241 acres in Orinda in the 1880s and built first a small ranch, then an elegant two-story mansion that was the center of Orinda social life at the turn of the century. The property included a forge, a dairy barn, a brick kiln, a carbide gas plant and a winery, but the family lost most of its assets in different business ventures, capped by the failure of the California Nevada railroad and a fire that destroyed the main house.

Most of the property became part of the holdings of the East Bay Water Company, now the East Bay Municipal Water District, except for a portion given to Orinda for a school, now the site of Wagner Ranch Elementary. Today EBMUD owns the creek and the land beside the creek, including approximately 20 feet on the Nature Area side of the creek. There was a path alongside the creek that was used by the children during their educational activities in the Nature Area. That path was so damaged by the winter storms that it is no longer considered safe for the children, and a spokesperson for EBMUD states it has no interest in restoring the trail.

According to Toris Jaeger, Naturalist at the Orinda Nature Area, during their time, the Wagners planted a number of non-native trees on the property, including eucalyptus, Monterey pines, cedar trees, and a specimen linden tree. The property is covered with many types of oak trees, including, a black oak, a garry oak, one or two tan oaks, one canyon oak, and many valley oaks and California live oaks. Some of the oak trees on the property are as much as 400 years old. Oak trees range in life span from 300 to 600 years, depending on species. There are also some redwoods on the property; redwoods can live for up to 1,500 years.

Since its inception, the Nature Area has offered hands-on experiential education to approximately 1,000 Orinda school children annually. Until the closure of the Nature Area, the OUSD had been planning on expanding the educational opportunities to other schools. The Nature Area comprises 18 acres of meadow, forest, ponds and streams and is a certified Schoolyard Habitat (#1568) by the National Wildlife Federation. San Pablo Creek, which is home to thousands of native plant and animal species, borders one side of the preserve. Since 1970, the programs of the Nature Area have helped students embrace the connection between themselves and their environment and develop a sense of lifelong stewardship.

The Friends of the Orinda Nature Area is a grass roots nonprofit organization formed in 2005 to prevent construction of a maintenance yard on site of the Nature Area. The Friends again stepped up in 2009 to fund education programs when the Orinda Union School District was unable to continue its support for the Nature Area due to funding limitations. Since then, The Friends have received substantial donations from the community for the naturalist, nature aides, and materials needed to conduct environmental education. For information, visit www.fwrna.org



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