

Published September 27th, 2023

Storm cleanup continues at Wagner Ranch Nature Area

By Alison Burns



San Pablo Dam on Wagner Ranch property at height of storm. Photo Reg Barrett

Since the Lamorinda Weekly last reported (July 5, p. A7) on the severe damage wrought by this year's winter storms at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, progress has been slow . but steady. And on Monday, Sept. 11, Orinda Union School District Superintendent Aida Glimme delivered an impressive summary of her board's achievements to date.

From its formation almost 20 years ago, the nonprofit Friends of Wagner Ranch Nature Area, has always been extremely supportive, but there has never been any state funding directed toward the almost-19-acre OUSD property, and years of deferred maintenance have taken their toll: this year's constant onslaught of winter rains resulted in the downing of ancient trees, washed out pathways and a dangerous rerouting of the San Pablo Creek where it borders the Nature Area.

As Glimme described it, a pathway that was once safely away from the creek, now has water flowing beneath it, and you can find yourself standing on something that she describes as "a little cavernous." She also reported "really significant overgrowth . with a lot of poison oak."

There is no instant fix to this disastrous state of affairs, particularly while, as Glimme put it, "the storm continues to work itself out" as the ground and trees become dryer. At present, it is impossible to count just how many trees have fallen or will continue to fall but eventually many more must be removed because it is "just a matter of time" before broken branches some crashing down.

Orinda's historic nature preserve is home to thousands of native plant and animal species. Owned by OUSD and certified as a Schoolyard Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation, this unique outdoor education site has had an immeasurable impact on over 15,000 children since its 1970 inception. To date, only elementary school children have been taught there, but prior to the double whammy of COVID and heavy winter storms, OUSD was looking at ways to expand opportunities to middle school students and possibly even other districts.

While it is still a question of playing the waiting game, Orinda's residents have not been slow in reacting to the crisis.

The two fenced-off Wagner Ranch and Nature Gardens have now been cleared and students are already gardening, thanks to the Wagner Ranch Parent Club. OUSD is also working in partnership with the Boys Team charity, which provided funding and volunteers. East Bay Tree Service, too, has been very supportive.

But the quarter-of-a-million-dollar question now is where OUSD will find the money to remove the dead and damaged trees. Restoring safe pathways and general accessibility will add more to the total bill and OUSD does not yet have an estimate for this. The District has not allocated additional funds for the Nature Area, which means that any monies used for maintenance of the area must come from the General Fund.

In 2022, the District applied for a \$4.5 million state allocation through the office of Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan's office, which was rejected. However, after the grant was resubmitted in 2023, OUSD gained approval for \$1.5 million - with certain demands, such as designating 15 acres as Open Space - while still remaining wholly owned by OUSD.

Glimme concluded her presentation with effusive thanks to the Friends of the Nature Area which, "clearly kept the area alive," as well as the WR Parent Club, Boys Team Charity, ONE Orinda, and the "many community members who have supported the area through funds and hours of volunteering."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)



