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Title: Recession Accelerates Save Mount Diablo's Conservation Purchases

Art: High resolution photos available for download at this link
<https://www.yousendit.com/download/RIRvb245Q1JBNkh2Wmc9PQ> until 12/22/10. After, please contact Beryl Anderson at banderson@savemountdiablo.org.

Caption: Save Mount Diablo's Dry Creek property in Brentwood looking towards Mount Diablo was purchased for just \$84,000 and will eventually be turned over to a park agency.

Credit: Scott Hein, www.heinphoto.com

Save Mount Diablo (SMD), an East Bay environmental non-profit, has been on a buying spree recently. The organization, whose goal is to preserve the natural land of Mount Diablo, has purchased a record number of properties and set several "firsts" in a down economy. In addition to a number of large parcel acquisitions, the group is also purchasing many small parcels, including five-acre "Dry Creek" purchased in September near Brentwood and five other parcels are in escrow at present.

Small Opportunity Parcels

In contrast to larger parcels, small opportunity properties normally cost much more per acre. Until the recession it was harder for them to compete with larger acreage preservation priorities. Recently, five, ten and twenty-acre properties east of Mount Diablo have been valued at 15-40% of previous values or sales. Acquisition of small properties allows Save Mount Diablo to consolidate strategic parcels, avoiding the impacts of additional houses in open space areas, providing future recreational access and blocking development on natural lands. Save Mount Diablo has acquired six small parcels in 2010 and protected five more since 2005.

Every additional house built on previously undeveloped properties in the area impacts already preserved lands and sensitive resources. Five of the parcels Save Mount Diablo purchased this year are located along Marsh Creek, helping to protect the second-longest, and least developed, creek in Contra Costa County. With previous purchases, more than eight miles of this important wildlife corridor have been protected.

Dry Creek, for example, one of the recent acquisitions is adjacent to the new Cowell Ranch State Park and includes a section of alkaline creek, for which the property was named. Although just 5.18 acres, it allows Save Mount Diablo to preserve high priority land (valuable both for resources or rare species habitat as well as to developers). The organization was able to purchase the property for 14% of its assessed value and completed the research and acquisition in record time- just twelve days. Ron Brown,

Executive Director of Save Mount Diablo, explains, “We can complete transactions far more quickly than government agencies. To get the best prices we have to pay cash and we can only do that with the ongoing support of our donors.”

“Small properties are often along creeks and roads,” Brown elaborated on Save Mount Diablo’s new acquisition strategy, “They can be strategic in affecting access and development potential of other properties. Creek properties are wildlife corridors and intrinsically important.” But smaller properties are just as complex to purchase and manage as larger ones according to Brown. Small parcels are usually acquired by private buyers for single houses or small subdivisions—building permits for single houses are administrative and we can’t affect them much. Brown continued, “These individual house sites near parks have impacts far beyond their size or number. They fragment larger habitats, break wildlife corridors and involve utilities and roads that lead to more development.”

Dry Creek’s purchase is an example of non-profit’s ability to move quickly in times of opportunity, with cash on hand from generous donors. This allows Save Mount Diablo to purchase smaller but strategically located properties to turn over to park agencies whose hands are tied by current funding crises.

Save Mount Diablo works with East Bay Regional Park District and the Contra Costa Habitat Conservancy (Conservancy) on a variety of larger acreage projects. Together they have helped protect approximately 7,500 acres in the past three years—almost twelve square miles. Last week Save Mount Diablo’s 320-acre Irish Canyon was transferred to East Bay Regional Park District, using Conservancy funds.

In the past five years Save Mount Diablo has acquired several large parcels, completing 208-acre Mangini Ranch at Concord’s southern edge in 2007, 320-acre Irish Canyon near Clayton in 2008, and 165-acre Viera-North Peak—one of the 3 highest elevation remaining private parcels in the County. Viera-North Peak was purchased in 2009 and a \$1 million Capital Campaign to complete the purchase has just concluded successfully.

During the same period Save Mount Diablo’s funding capacity increased and the economic recession dramatically decreased property values, especially for small vacant properties. Utilizing its new small parcel strategy to preserve strategically located lower acreage parcels as opportunity allows, Save Mount Diablo has been able to get both quality and quantity acquisitions for preservation.

“Ultimately, we would like to preserve all 180,000 acres on and around Mount Diablo for future generations to enjoy forever”, said Brown. “Save Mount Diablo and park agencies will continue to focus on large parcels and their natural resources. What’s new is that we’re also tackling protection of a number of small properties. Without them the landscape will remain fragmented. What we’re doing is reassembling a wilderness for wildlife and for recreation for the more than seven million people who live within an hour’s drive.”

Summary

Who: Save Mount Diablo, non-profit organization in Walnut Creek, CA

What: Acquired a record number of small properties for preservation both because of and despite the recession, including five parcels in escrow at present.

Where: The Morgan Territory and Brentwood areas of Contra Costa County, CA

Why: Small opportunity parcel strategy has allowed SMD win-win success. Purchasing small but strategically located properties allows Save Mount Diablo to acquire land more quickly on behalf of park agencies that face current funding problems.

How: Increased support from individuals enables Save Mount Diablo to make quick purchases upfront to be later replenished through grants and fundraising.

Save Mount Diablo is a non-profit 501(c)(3) conservation organization, which has been preserving lands on and around Mount Diablo and educating the public to the mountain's natural values since 1971. Preserved lands have increased from 6,788 acres in one park to more than 100,000 acres in 40 parks and preserves. Save Mount Diablo continues to preserve, protect and restore the remainder of the mountain. Contact: Save Mount Diablo, telephone: (925) 947-3535, fax: (925) 947-0642, 1901 Olympic Blvd., Suite 220, Walnut Creek, CA 94596; www.SaveMountDiablo.org