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Supervisors vote to buy land for trails

El Dorado County will acquire 40 acres for hikers, bikers, horses.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published May 16, 2004*)

With the backing of county advisory panels, recreational organizations and business groups, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors allocated \$280,000 to purchase and develop land for a regional trails park along the south fork of the American River.

Tuesday's vote to acquire 40 acres of the historic Cronin Ranch off Highway 49 near Pilot Hill was unanimous. But board members also sought assurance that adequate money would be available for long-planned projects such as the Pollock Pines and Bass Lake Regional parks.

The supervisors directed staff members to prepare a comprehensive list of parks projects, their status and funding sources for review at the board's June 8 meeting.

Some members said they would have liked to have had that information before allocating funds for the trails park. But, faced with a June 30 deadline to buy the land, they agreed to proceed.

"It would make this trail a gem of Northern California," Supervisor Charlie Paine said of the park, intended as a staging area for hikers, bikers, equestrians and others using the American River Trail.

The county plans to buy the 40 acres from the Coloma-based American River Conservancy. The conservancy seeks to raise approximately \$2.5 million by the end of June to acquire the last two parcels of the Cronin Ranch for an eight-mile trail extending from Highway 49 to Folsom Lake. The property would be an important link in a long-term plan for a trail connecting Sutter's Fort in Sacramento to Sutter's Mill in Coloma.

The county Parks and Recreation Commission and the trails advisory committee endorsed the purchase, as did the El Dorado County and Coloma-Lotus chambers of commerce and bicycling and equestrian groups.

Bob Smart, a Parks and Recreation Commission member, said the panel focused on spending priorities for approximately \$1.7 million in state park bond revenues. "We're looking at going for the biggest bang for the buck right now," he said.

Faced with limited funding, the commission gave priority to projects that could be completed readily, he said.

The commission also supported Supervisor Jack Sweeney's request to help fund the city of Placerville's swimming pool renovation. Allocation of money for that project, however, was not on Tuesday's board agenda.

George Sanders, general services director, said it was not the Parks and Recreation Commission's intent to overlook projects on which the county has made substantial progress. Parks projects draw from a variety of funding sources, he said, and some are included in the county's capital improvement program.

Sweeney supported purchasing the Cronin Ranch property, saying it was the right site for a trails park and equestrian center. "You can put an arena on that property without very much work," he said.

His concern, Sweeney said, was how the property would be acquired. "We're in a position where we're being put in the middle of the process," he said.

Rather than buying the land from the American River Conservancy, Sweeney suggested that the board purchase it directly from the Bacchi family, longtime cattle ranchers who offered to sell the land to the conservancy. The 40-acre site is part of a 209-acre parcel, and Sweeney asked what would happen if the conservancy were unable to raise the money to buy the land.

Asked by Supervisor David Solaro why he hadn't raised those concerns earlier, Sweeney said the first he heard that the county would be asked to purchase the 40 acres was when Paine presented the proposal to the board May 4.

Paine urged the board to proceed with the purchase from the conservancy, saying, "We have a legitimate project and a legitimate process."

Of the \$280,000 allocation, \$180,000 will be used to buy the 40 acres. The remaining \$100,000 will be a grant to the American River Conservancy to complete the purchase of adjoining property and to design and construct the trail system.

About the Writer

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