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Marin County considers \$850K contribution for Bald Hill deal



The summit of Bald Hill looms above the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo.

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A deal is in the works that could add 60 acres of vacant land in Ross to the Bald Hill Open Space Preserve.

The land includes the 1,132-foot hill, a landmark that serves as a backdrop to Ross and San Anselmo.

The Marin Open Space Trust has entered into an agreement to buy the land for \$1.85 million no later than March 12. On Tuesday, Marin County supervisors will consider an agreement to purchase the property from the trust for \$850,000.

The property would then be combined with the Bald Hill Open Space Preserve and overseen by the Marin County Open Space District. The \$850,000 would come from the district's open space fund. The district receives annual funds from a parcel tax that was approved when the district was formed in the early 1970s.

"I think most Ross Valley residents assumed it was already protected public land," said Supervisor Katie Rice. "In fact, this ingrained part of Ross Valley's identity has been vulnerable to development this whole time."

"If this is approved," Rice said, "the acquisition would fulfill a decades-old goal of the community and the county to protect this invaluable landscape and prevent development on its pristine hillsides."

The preserve was created in 1994 and since then adjacent land has gradually been added as public open space. The treeless summit, however, has remained privately owned.

The protection and preservation of Bald Hill has been identified as a high priority by local officials, environmental groups and conservation-minded residents since 1976.

Jonathan Braun, a board member of the Marin Open Space Trust, said he has been working to preserve Bald Hill since 1988.

“My family moved to San Anselmo in 1948, and my parents bought this little home here which is on the slope of Bald Hill,” Braun said. “I’ve lived next to the mountain my whole life. My first experience with Bald Hill was being carried up there on my dad’s shoulders.”

Braun said many people in the area feel a deep connection with Bald Hill “because that is where we all went venturing as kids. It’s where I go to find some peace and solitude.”

The hill is also the home of the endangered Marin blind harvestman spider.

In 1990, San Anselmo, Ross and the Marin County Open Space District backed a bond measure campaign to purchase the acreage at the summit, but voter support fell 180 votes short of the two-thirds majority required for passage.

Another effort to purchase the property made about 10 years ago also failed because of a lack of interest from the property’s longtime owner, Asia Alliance Finance and Investment Limited, a Hong Kong company. The owner now appears enthusiastic.

“The sellers are excited about the prospect of the land becoming permanent open space,” said a representative for Asia Alliance, Kevin Knowles, owner of Conservation Land Group.

The addition of the land would increase the Bald Hill Open Space Preserve from 46 acres to 106 acres.

Braun said the Marin Open Space Trust has received strong support from Ross Councilwoman Elizabeth Robbins, Ross resident Dan Kalafatas and the Tamalpais Conservation Club.

Robbins said Monday that the 60 acres constitute one of the largest undeveloped parcels in Ross. The land is zoned for single-family homes.

Like Marin County and other municipalities in the county, Ross is facing a state mandate to identify land where a large amount of housing can be built between 2023 and 2031. Ross is charged with zoning for 111 new residences during that eight-year period.

By comparison, Ross was required to zone for just 18 more homes for the previous eight-year cycle from 2015 to 2023.

The Ross planning director, Rebecca Markwick, confirmed the land is not among the sites chosen to meet the town’s new state mandate.

Robbins said, “While the parcel could be developed for a few large estates, the extreme steepness of the property essentially precludes building a large number of housing units.”

Braun and other supporters of the purchase are optimistic about raising the private donations. The goal is to raise \$2.1 million, \$250,000 more than the appraised value of the property, in order to cover legal costs and other expenses.