

## Board sets aside funds for Mt. Konocti land purchase

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
 Wednesday, 19 March 2008  
 Last Updated Monday, 26 May 2008

LAKEPORT — A unanimous and enthusiastic vote by the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday approved setting aside \$1.2 million in the 2008-09 county budget to put toward the purchase of 1,500 acres on Mt. Konocti.

Public Services Director Kim Clymire took the request to the board Tuesday morning. He has been leading the county effort to organize the land purchase.

“This is an exciting day for a lot of us, said Clymire. “This is an agenda item I have been trying to bring to your board for about 28 years, believe it or not.”

It wasn't until last December, however, that the Fowler family, who has owned the property for several decades, made known their willingness to sell the land. The Fowlers have offered the county first right of refusal in a deal that must be completed by December 2009, as Lake County News has reported.

Clymire said the land will become a significant asset to county's tourism industry. “The potential for this project is enormous.”

The Trust for Public Land is negotiating an option to purchase agreement with the Fowlers' attorney, Peter Windrem, said Clymire.

If that effort is successful and the trust is able to buy the land, the intent is to turn it over to the county, Clymire explained. Alternately, the county might take over as lead agency if the negotiations aren't successful.

The appraisal valued the main portion of the land at \$2.6 million, said Clymire. The Buckingham Peak area, the site of communication towers, was valued at \$1.2 million and generates \$75,000 annually.

Clymire said the county is still considering whether or not to acquire the tower site.

He asked the board to approve a tentative commitment to move forward, using \$1.2 million from one-time unanticipated geothermal revenues.

Clymire showed the board slides from a trip to the property last week. The view is so expansive, he said, that they could see snow on the top of Mt. Lassen in the distance.

He also showed a picture of a cabin, circa 1909, on the mountain that he suggested could be renovated for a small visitors center.

The state owns a portion of land on the mountain where a lookout tower once used by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection is located. Clymire said the tower is no longer used and the county plans to approach the state to ask that the land be donated.

Supervisor Jeff Smith said he didn't want to pass up the opportunity; doing so, he said, would likely earn the current board comparisons to previous boards that passed up picking up the county's water rights. “I think it's one of those things we have to do.”

Clymire said he expects to have an agreement on the property to bring back to the board within a few weeks.

County Chief Administrative Officer Kelly Cox said he would like to see the state and federal government participate in the purchase, especially since the Bureau of Land Management has indicated it has money set aside to help.

Supervisor Anthony Farrington suggested that, for him, not getting the Buckingham Peak property is “almost a deal breaker.”

Supervisor Rob Brown said he has a gut feeling that buying the land is very important, and acknowledged that he has been a critic of the government buying up land.

“There is no question of how I feel about this,” he said.

He said he has been approached by many people in the private sector willing to donate money to help.

Having known property owner Mike Fowler since the third grade, Brown said he knows that Fowler wants the county to have the land.

“This is an opportunity that we will never see again in our lifetime,” Brown added.

Supervisor Denise Rushing said she would like to see the county purchase all of the property as well, and said she believed the community would rally around it, as it had with the Nylander Park purchase in Clearlake Oaks. “This is a part of who we are.”

Clymire explained that there are other, remaining parcels on the mountain that are privately held, including some by the Mazzola family, whose patriarch, Joseph Mazzola, was a well-known union leader. In one place there are easements across the Mazzola property to access the Fowler parcels.

Cox added that the county should look for future opportunities to purchase those properties should they become available.

He said that last week he went with county staff up to the top of the mountain, something he's wanted to do for 30 years. The sense he came away with was that everyone should be able to see and enjoy the land.

Windrem told the board that the mountain's preservation has been of great importance to the Fowlers in the more than 50 years they've owned it.

He said he and his clients are working diligently with the county to wrap up the purchase agreement. "Hopefully we can get something concluded very, very shortly."

Windrem added that he believes the project could pull the community together.

Enthusiasm for project extends to community

Audience members were nearly unanimous in their enthusiasm for the purchase. In addition, members from the Sierra Club Lake Group, Redbud Audubon and Lake County Land Trust all stated their support.

"To purchase this mountain to go with that lake is going to be something that none of us today can even comprehend," said recently retired Clear Lake State Park Ranger Tom Nixon.

Tony and Carolyn Marchetti, who live on Konocti Road — which leads to the mountaintop — cautioned the board that the road is in very bad shape, is narrow and needs work to make it safe.

Cobb resident Tom Slaight said peak oil is impacting tourism, and asked if research is being done on who will actually come from outside of the county to visit the county.

Kelseyville resident and businessman Gary Olson said he supported buying the land. "There's no place in Lake County that compares to the top of that mountain."

Olson said from a real estate standpoint it offers incredible value, besides immense opportunities for ecotourism.

Spring Valley resident Monte Winters, representing local ham radio operators, said the Fowlers have hosted the best repeater in Northern California at the telecommunications site. He expressed his hope that the towers will continue to be managed beneficially, because the repeater is a vital emergency resource.

Former Northshore Supervisor Louise Talley called the purchase "the most exciting thing I have seen since the redevelopment program started."

Her only question was how the handicapped and elderly would be able to access the nonmotorized site. County officials said they would work out ways to make it accessible.

The county also received an important expression of Congressional support.

Brad Onorato, district aide for Congressman Mike Thompson, told the board Thompson supported the effort.

Thompson has spoken with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Onorato added, and they've pledged to do what they can to secure federal funding for the purchase by June of 2009, when funds would need to be in line.

Sheriff Rod Mitchell also sent a message to the board, offering the use of inmate labor crews for trail maintenance and development.

Brown moved to approve the proposal to commit the funds, and instantly got seconds from rest of the board.

The motion was approved 5-0, and received a standing ovation from the gallery. For views of Lake County from the top of Mt. Konocti, see our gallery page at [http://lakeconews.com/component/option,com\\_wrapper/Itemid,37/](http://lakeconews.com/component/option,com_wrapper/Itemid,37/).

E-mail Elizabeth Larson at [el Larson@lakeconews.com](mailto:el Larson@lakeconews.com).

{mos\_sb\_discuss:3}