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City of Orinda steps in to stop the clock on \$1.5 million for Nature Area

By Sora O'Doherty



The Wagner Ranch Nature Area in happier times. Students and teachers enjoy a Thanksgiving Dinner in 2019 before the closure of the area in 2023 caused by severe winter storm damage. Photo Sora O'Doherty

renewal and reopening. Many people have shown up at OUSD board meetings to urge the district to accept the state money and move forward towards renovating and reopening the Nature Area.

At the board's June 10 meeting, Superintendent Aida Glimme presented an update. A contract with McNeal Arboriculture Consultants will be funded by Fund 40, and the district will seek reimbursement if available from other potential funds. The contract provides for the identification of trees that are dangerous and need to be removed from the Nature Area. A draft Request for Proposals package for the actual work has been prepared. The district plans to examine reopening the Nature Area in phases.

Rebecca Dahlberg and Kathy Barrett, Co-Presidents of the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, again addressed the Board on June 10. Dahlberg pointed out that Fund 40, the Special Reserve Fund for Capital Outlay Projects, can only address hazards in a small portion of the nature area, not the entire 18-acre property. The balance of Fund 40 stands at under \$3 million currently, according to the board's audit report.

Dahlberg noted that Fund 40 would not be able to fund restrooms, training for a new naturalist, or ongoing maintenance for the nature area, while the money from the state could fund all of those items. She added that the Friends of the Nature Area can continue to help with the maintenance of the nature area.

Dahlberg suggested that the board obtain a second legal opinion concerning accepting the \$1.5 million in state funds. Other public speakers spoke of their personal memories about the Nature Area, all urging the board to take the money from the state.

Back in 2022, the OUSD board of trustees voted to ask Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan to seek funding from the governor's office to be allocated from the state's 2022-23 budget for the express purpose of preserving and protecting the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. The matter was brought to the board by OUSD Superintendent Aida Glimme, who suggested that the ask would be for \$5 million or more.

The request was made after District staff were informed of the opportunity to submit a request for funding and protection of the nature area. The funds that were available could only be used for such projects, and not to improve school facilities, to secure services for students, (such as mental health support), or for staff salaries. The grant to Orinda was one of dozens related to natural resources and environmental protection in California.

Although there are no specifics in the budget act about the grant, the Assembly member has asked the school district to memorialize its intention to preserve the Nature Area as open land in perpetuity or for 99 years. The district has expressed concerns that to do so would in some way limit the ability of the district to raise funds for the Nature Area in the future.

The stewardship proposal was on the agenda of the city council on June 18, after this issue of The Lamorinda Weekly went to press.

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