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PD 12-4-96

\$3.6 million open space deal approved

By TOM CHORNEAU
Staff Writer

Despite concerns over costs, Sonoma County supervisors unanimously approved a record \$3.6 million land deal Tuesday aimed at creating the North Bay's first publicly held "conservation bank" for wetlands replacement.

The 174-acre west Santa Rosa ranch, home to a variety of endangered and protected species, will be permanently protected from development, while at the same time offering developers a source of "mitigation credits" that would allow them to build on wetlands in other parts of the county.

"This is clearly a good purchase for the Open Space District, but the question here is one of cost," said Supervisor Jim Harberson.

"When the public sees that we're spending \$20,000 an acre, they are going to want to know what they are getting for it," he said. "But you look at this property and you can see we are getting a great deal for the money."

The ranch, situated on the western edge of Santa Rosa's city limits on Occidental and Hall roads, includes nearly 50 acres of high-quality vernal pools and wetlands

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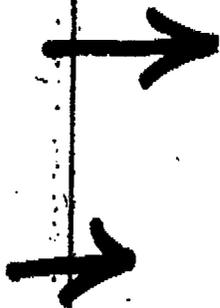
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#20,689.⁰⁰ PER ACRE

75,000.⁰⁰ PER ACRE

10 CREDITS AT
7,500.⁰⁰ EACH PER ACRE

**CONSPIRACY
FILE**



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Space

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mentally important and probably should be protected, but they question the price of \$20,689 an acre.

Situated just outside Santa Rosa city limits on Occidental and Hall roads, the ranch supports a variety of endangered and protected species, including vernal pool fairy shrimp and Sebastopol meadow-lark.

The ranch is owned by Glean and Melie Cramer of Rancho Mirage, who bought the land in 1978. It has an assessed value of \$586,307. Under current zoning, up to three home sites could be allowed on the property.

Recently, the owners, along with North County developer Rich Coombs, proposed building a golf course on the property along with some residential units, Coombs said. The idea was dropped after several state agencies raised objections about disturbing the wetlands, he said.

But an appraisal completed in September 1985 by Patrick Idiart & Associates of Petaluma found the property's considerable wetlands could be used to the owners' advantage. Idiart estimated the property's value at \$3.6 million, if federal agencies — namely the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency — approved the ranch as a mitigation bank for wetlands replacement.

Under existing federal rules, a developer who wants to fill in seasonal wetlands can get permission to do so if the builder also agrees to replace them.

A mitigation bank is a parcel of land whose natural resource value can be sold or traded as credits, said Carl Wilcox, supervisor of the Department of Fish and Game's environmental services in the North Coast.

Wilcox estimated the Cramer ranch has about 600 wetlands credits, which could be sold for about \$7,500 each for a total of

\$4.5 million.

As proposed, the state would own the property and operate the wetlands bank. Fish and Game has promised to spend up to \$3.6 million in income from the sales of the credits to protect and restore other wetlands in Sonoma County.

The Open Space District would retain a conservation easement over the property — a contract that permanently prohibits development of the land.

The problem with the plan, Alys said, is that the state has no marketing analysts to back up its claim that developers would pay the \$7,500 for each credit. He said that when it is all said and done, the Open Space District might find it has spent \$1.8 million to protect a piece of property that probably could not be developed anyway.

David Hansen, general manager of the district, said the Cramer property could be developed, despite the wetlands.

"The owner was working on a golf course idea, plus there is some limited, low-density development that probably could be done," he said. "There's only about 48 acres of wetlands on the site, out of 174 acres — I wouldn't say the property couldn't be developed at all."

Hansen noted that the property fits the district's acquisition criteria: It is a highly visible spot on a scenic corridor; it sits right on the city's western edge, which has been targeted for protection; and the property contains many protected species. He said the fact that the state wants to create a mitigation bank on the land is only of secondary interest.

C.F.

FOR THE RECORD

Singer-songwriter Phillip Sandifer will present a concert at 7 p.m. Saturday at Victory Celebration Centre, 5565 S. Main St., Kelseyville. A wrong date was given on Page D4 Saturday.

The Press Democrat uses this space to correct errors that appear in the news columns. Please call the newsroom at 528-5555 to report errors.

\$7,500.00 EACH

\$20,684.00 Per Acre
\$75,000.00 Per Acre