

The Montclarion

The newspaper with the hillside slant

• Friday, February 8, 2002 •

Newsstand 50 cents (tax included)

In Butters Canyon Land we trust

'The Milky Way is another shiny cricket chirping while leaves fall.'

— HAIKU BY OAKLAND POET MICHAEL MCCLURE

THE CRICKETS weren't quite chirping on Saturday afternoon in Butters Canyon. But the neighbors were, and the members of the Butters Canyon Land Trust were, and poet Michael McClure was, and everyone else was positively crowing. With good reason.

About 50 or so people gathered to celebrate the dedication of the first part of what they hope will be permanent open space in "the last wild canyon" in Oakland.

For those who don't quite know about Butters Canyon, you can find it off Joaquin Miller Road, less than a mile above Highway 13. It winds upward to Robinson Drive and is well known by local hikers and bicyclists and nature freaks.

The section being preserved is a remarkable little canyon that feels like it belongs in another century. With the narrow winding road that traverses it you almost expect to see horse-drawn carriages pulling by. In fact, a number of horses do live in the neighborhood and a couple even attended the ceremony, making their own donations.

The story of the Butters Canyon Land Trust is another shining example of citizen participation and community activism. For years, the canyon, which is one of the headwaters of Peralta Creek, languished in undeveloped limbo. It is zoned R30 for houses, but the combination of steep lots, difficult access, and creek bed protections didn't make it an attractive place to build spec homes.

But with the market surge in the last few years, that's changed. There are 20 or so buildable lots in the canyon, and neighbors began to fret



GARY TURCHIN
There There

losing their little paradise.

So the local neighborhood association, known as the Friends of the Last Wild Canyon, decided to see what they could do about preserving it. A tall order, no doubt, but one they met with fierce determination.

Friends formed a branch group dedicated to establishing a land trust, and — led by the feisty Priscilla Stuckey — they have in short order done just that. With the help of Friends of Parks and Rec, who acted as their initial fiscal agent, they succeeded at getting legal Land Trust status in only eight months, a process that often takes years. They also have a pending 501(c)3 non-profit application on file. Stuckey called getting the legal ball rolling "a little like a low-tech version of a start-up company."

The group's determination so impressed the Coastal Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land that the Butters Land Trust soon won offers from both groups for technical support. The CC is about to begin a biological survey of the canyon, while the TFPL is consulting on organizational and non-profit issues.

With its legal act squared away, the new trust began to collect donations and pledges toward acquiring some of the lots. To date, the group's gathered about \$55,000 worth of pledges — mostly from neighbors — and cash donations of almost \$6,000. Groups like a local hiking club and a Contra Costa bicycling club

have chipped in to help save one of their favorite spots. But it's all a drop in the bucket when the \$160,000 to \$200,000 asking price on some of the lots is factored in.

Then a miracle happened. Toward the end of last year, the trust began having discussions with one of the larger property owners in the canyon. The owners were hoping to gain easements to their lots. Instead, the owners threw up their hands and, according to Stuckey, said "To heck with the easements, we'll just donate the land."

And that's what they've done, donated their three lots in the heart of the canyon to the Butters Land Trust. These guardian angels are Helen Nicholas and Bob Fulmer.

Though they are pretty reticent to blow their own horns (they didn't even attend the dedication ceremony), their generosity is astounding and sweet beyond measure and stands in stark contrast to the "me-me-me" world most of us occupy.

I caught up with Helen Nicholas in her office this week, and she agreed to talk in hopes of encouraging other property owners to follow suit.

"We all work to make money," she told me, "but the goal is not to just stockpile vast sums of it, but to buy ourselves an environment and a quality of life." She added, "We couldn't imagine anything better to do than preserving that land. We feel like kings up here; we see nothing but green all the way to the Golden Gate Bridge."

"Besides, it's not that generous," she explained "We get a write-off commensurate to our donation. It's not all about altruism; it's just smart. I wish other people would do it."

We all do, Helen, but frankly, it is "that generous." And thanks to your donation, at least a part of the canyon will, as Stuckey put it, "be preserved as green space in perpetuity — so that more people, not fewer, can enjoy it."

It was the official designation of these three lots as open space that was being celebrated on Saturday, Feb. 2.

"For a while I was wondering if it was possible," said Stuckey in her dedication remarks, "but we are here to celebrate that it is indeed possible." She went on to warn that while the canyon comprises about eight acres, "We have now managed to preserve almost one acre."

Seven to go and counting.

Then the official ribbon cutting ceremony was held — with a twist. The "ribbon" was a strand of ivy. Clearing out the invading ivy and replanting with native species is the next hurdle for the group. On hand for the celebration was outgoing City Councilman Dick Spees, as well as two of the people trying to replace him, David Stein and Jean Quan.

Spees said he supported the Land Trust "1,000 percent" and said the council is studying ways to rezone the area to protect it. But he went even further. "My goal," he said, "is to link the trails on the top of the hill with trails along the shore."

Spees also admonished the crowd to not let council "water

down" (his pun) the creek ordinance that could help preserve this area. Amen to that Mr. Spees, and if you are still on council when the ordinance is reviewed, I for one will remind you of your watery words.

Besides the scrumptious homemade cookies, the festivities were capped off by local resident and renowned poet Michael McClure reading some of his work.

"I work with the shape of spirit," he read, "moving the matter in my hands."

Priscilla Stuckey and her board at the Butters Land

Trust, with the generous help of Helen Nicholas and Bob Fulmer, have indeed worked the shape of Oakland's spirit and moved the matter of Butters Canyon into all of our hands.

Neighbors, take a hike or a bike ride up through the canyon. Get a look at what is one of Oakland's sweetest natural wonders.

Rumor has it that your tax-deductible donation would also be much appreciated.