

Neighbors join to save wild canyon

Hills residents form land trust to bar houses from natural site

By Laura Casey
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Two highly charged neighborhood organizations in the Oakland hills are doing more than just crying about their beautiful open space being encroached upon by "monster" houses. They plan to buy what's left.

Homeowners by Butters Canyon, a leafy dip of land near Robinson Drive and Butters Drive near Joaquin Miller Park, have formed Friends of the Last Wild Canyon and the Butters Land Trust in an effort preserve the ravine.

So far, the groups have raised \$54,000 to buy a fifth of an acre of property on Butters Avenue on sale for \$125,000. But they need much, much more to save the canyon they love.

"Once this land is gone, it's gone forever," Robinson Drive resident Carol Bernau said. "Our hope is to try to preserve, conserve and protect anything we can."

Bernau, steering committee

member of the 200-member strong Friends of the Last Wild Canyon, takes frequent strolls on a path along the canyon. She is quick to point out the wild animals — owls, eagles, deer and coyotes — that cross her path.

Bernau is afraid the half-mile long canyon and serene creek that runs through it will be ruined by continued development in the area.

"The land is being fenced, paved and covered with housing," she said.

The canyon is divided into about 30 privately owned lots. Until the recent housing boom, Bernau said, developers have ignored the empty lots because many drop steeply into the canyon and present costly building challenges. So for years it has been a parklike haven cut by walking paths and enjoyed by bicyclists who use it as a scenic alternate route to Joaquin Miller Road.

But in the last two years, developers have snapped up a

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number of the lots and want to sprinkle the area with more than a dozen new houses. Some of the remaining lots are in escrow and on others construction has begun.

Since the canyon is a patchwork of private property, any kind of house could be built with few restrictions. East Bay Regional Park District officials are not interested in buying the land, even though it is a wildlife corridor, because it is not directly connected to a district park.

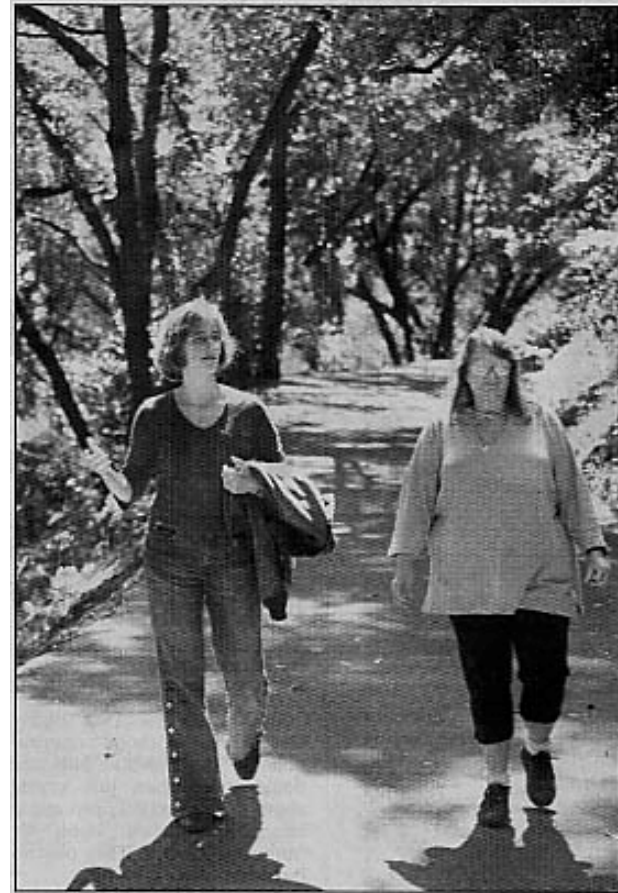
Oakland officials are looking into changing the area's zoning laws and creek bed ordinances, but not quickly enough for the neighbors' taste. That's why neighbors are raising money to buy the land collectively.

Free-lance book editor Priscilla Stuckey is the founder of Butters Land Trust, which she set up in March after finding out a small parcel of land near her home was for sale and a developer wanted to buy it.

In three days neighbors raised \$50,000, and Stuckey imagines turning the parcel into a neighborhood park.

"It could be a nice little community picnic area here," she said.

While Friends of the Last Wild Canyon lobbies political leaders to help conserve the canyon, the Butters Land Trust is an independent organization that works with private land-



D. ROSS CAMERON — Staff

Priscilla Stuckey (left) and Carol Bernau walk along Butters Road next to Butters Canyon, Oakland hills land they hope to save from development.

owners to buy land or create conservation easements. In conservation easements, landowners sign an agreement to permanently protect a part of their property for conservation in exchange for an annual tax deduction.

There are about 1,200 land trusts throughout the United States, several in California. The Butters Land Trust is the only such nonprofit in Oakland.

Members of both the trust and the Friends of the Last Wild Canyon hope that, in time, they

will be able to raise enough money in grants and private donations to protect the whole canyon. But money is short, and development in the area is furious.

"We think there are a lot of people all over the Bay Area that would like to protect this," Bernau said. "It can happen easily. This is just the beginning, really."

For more information about the Butters Land Trust, call Priscilla Stuckey (510) 482-2496.