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EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES

INDUSTRY WRAPUPS

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Good business

Bank and Trust create safe haven for man and beast

A unique public-private partnership will make sure an unspoiled corner of Contra Costa County remains a sylvan refuge for East Bay humans and endangered species alike.

The relationship between [The Mechanics Bank](#) and the [Muir Heritage Land Trust](#) - a nonprofit organization established in 1988 to acquire and preserve open space and promote environmental education in Contra Costa County - has helped set aside more than 1,800 acres in various parts of the county.

The latest example of this partnership's success is the purchase of the 702-acre Fernandez Ranch along Highway 4 between Hercules and Martinez. It may eventually become part of a 3,000-acre public park, if adjoining parcels - including a 2,000-acre watershed owned by East Bay Municipal Utility District - are added to the former holdings of the Fernandez family, a clan that once owned 9,000 acres of land now known as Pinole and was instrumental in the development of the west county community.

Family patriarch Bernardo Fernandez moved to the area from his native Portugal in 1854. For decades, he grew wheat and grazed cattle on his expanse.

Late last year, Muir Heritage Land Trust Executive Director Christina Batt said her organization paid \$3.2 million for acreage, an amount that includes funds to help restore natural and man-made features on the ranch.

Between the organization receiving huge grants from the [Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation](#), the [California Coastal Conservancy](#) and California Wildlife Conservation Board in December 2004 and escrow closing on the property last month, The Mechanics Bank managed the land trust's donations. It's a function the community-oriented bank has been performing for the land trust since its original financial adviser stepped down several years ago.

Slither and hop

Fernandez Ranch is home to no fewer than two endangered species - the Alameda whipsnake, also known as the Alameda striped racer, and the California Red-legged Frog, a once-abundant amphibian feted in Mark Twain's famous tale, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," that's grown distressingly rare in recent decades because of chemical pesticides. The endangered whipsnake, which usually grows to four feet in length, has the unusual characteristic of rising and coiling like a cobra while stalking its prey.

If a bridge on the Fernandez Ranch property washed out in the 1970s can be repaired, the new park and home to the whipsnake and red-legged frog is likely to become part of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, a 500-mile long continuous trail ringing San Francisco Bay still being pieced together by area environmental and recreational organizations.

Edward M. Downer III - chairman of the board of the Richmond-based bank that has 30 branches, 500 employees and about \$2.5 billion in assets founded by his grandfather a century ago - said the land is well worth preserving.

"It's really quite lovely," Downer said. "Most of it is very hilly and you get some magnificent views from the hilltops."

Though hiking is possible on roads running through the property, Downer said development of the park will include building trails to increase public access to those breathtaking vistas of surrounding hills, valleys and bay.

One of the valleys contains about 80 acres of level land, providing a perfect focal point for the future park, Batt said.

Mark Wilson is the perfect liaison between the bank and land trust, serving on the boards of directors for both organizations. He said though modern-day descendants of Bernardo Fernandez haven't lived on the property for many years, they did not want to see the remaining remnant of their family's once-vast holdings plowed under by bulldozers and built upon by developers.

Family history

Wilson and Downer have perhaps a special sensitivity to the Fernandez family and preserving pockets of western and northern Contra Costa, considering their own backgrounds. Downer's family has deep roots in the area, with his grandfather - who founded the bank in 1905 - having arrived in the area 16 years earlier to work as a train station agent. The first Edward Downer was active in civic affairs during the early days of Pinole, as was Bernardo Fernandez.

Wilson's family ties go back almost as far, as his grandfather, Aubrey Wilson, arrived in west Contra Costa a year after The Mechanics Bank was founded, the year of the great San Francisco Earthquake. He established the Wilson & Kratzer Mortuary - still operating in San Pablo - in 1919.

Batt is the newcomer, having arrived from Philadelphia a mere 22 years ago. But she gets high marks from Downer for her savvy in helping preserve parts of the region for generations to come. She has served as the land trust's director since 1996.

"Tina has done an exceptional job and handles herself gracefully," he said. "... She takes subjects that could be controversial and brings people together to accomplish great things for the community."

The three Martinez residents have all played various roles over the 17-year history of the land trust, which derives its name from its first purchase - 325 acres of land known as the Mt. Wanda site across Highway 4 from famed naturalist John Muir's home in Martinez, now a national historic site operated by the National Park Service.

Subsequent purchases have included the 158-acre Dutra Ranch on Franklin Ridge east of Hercules; the 242-acre Sky Ranch, also on Franklin Ridge; the adjacent 180-acre Stonehurst property in a Martinez subdivision; and the 124-acre Pacheco Marsh property within the Carquinez Strait Heritage Area Corridor.

"We buy land from willing sellers," Batt said of the land trust's purchasing philosophy.

Though its main mission is preservation of open space for beauty and recreation, Batt said she also never loses sight of what she feels is an equally vital role for the land trust.

"We feel very strongly about environmental education, especially for young people," Batt said. "We have worked with young kids to help restore Alhambra Creek and have worked with students from [Vicente Martinez Continuation High School](#) to clean up the portion around their school. It's so important we pass on land stewardship skills to the next generation."

Batt said she always welcomes assistance from volunteers of all ages from the general population, too, who will

be vital in helping restore and develop Fernandez Ranch. To contact the land trust, call 925-228-5460 or go to www.muirheritagelandtrust.org.

Good Business focuses on the good works of business in the East Bay. To comment or suggest column items, contact David Goll at dgoll@bizjournals.com or 925-598-1436.

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