

## CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Posted on Wed, Jun. 14, 2006

### **VIEWPOINTS: PETER LANGLEY: Land trust head made strides for open space**

MUIR HERITAGE LAND TRUST executive director Tina Batt will leave her post Friday, June 16. She is off to Harvard for a one-year mid-career masters in public administration program.

After 17 years, she leaves behind a dynamic organization poised to take on new challenges. The operating budget has grown to \$480,000, and the capital budget to \$2.5 million. There are stewardship funds and a six-figure endowment.

A paid staff of four, including one person who runs an environmental education program, occupies offices in the Telfer Building in downtown Martinez. Linus Eukel, whom Batt has groomed as her successor, is ready to step into her role.

And over the years, Batt has attracted diverse and talented people to the Land Trust board. Lawyers, developers, real estate and insurance agents, software developers, teachers, CPAs, and land management professionals have served.

This is not the organization that Batt and a small group of activists formed in 1989. In fact, she did not even set out to start a land trust.

While studying to be a real estate agent, she applied to serve on the Alhambra Valley Specific Plan committee. Then-Supervisor Nancy Fahden formed the committee to advise the Board of Supervisors on a plan for the proposed Stonehurst development.

Ultimately, developer Jim Busby and the committee agreed on a concept: He would cluster five-acre parcels and dedicate 150 acres of ridge line as open space. This created a problem: What entity would assume the development rights to the open space?

Batt researched the issue and came up with the idea of forming a land trust for this purpose. Busby agreed and the Martinez Regional Land Trust was born.

The new land trust became a magnet for other local environmentalists. Alhambra Valley Improvement Association President Hal Olson and Friends of the Franklin Hills members became initial board members. Local residents Nancy Schaefer and Mary Ann Gaebe also signed on.

Almost immediately the land trust had another project. Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, obtained \$3 million in federal funds to buy Mount Wanda, which had been in several developers' sights.

The owner kept 25 acres and a house. For \$150,000, he offered to deed it for public use after his wife died.

The East Bay Regional Park District put up one-half this amount and asked the city of Martinez to fund the other half. When the City Council declined, the land trust stepped in. Batt found a private lender to advance the funds and raised the money to pay him back in 18 months.

After these successes, the land trust targeted Franklin Ridge, which runs between Mount Wanda and Briones park. Over the next decade, the trust purchased three properties on the ridge: Sky Ranch, which is 242 acres; the 80-acre Gustin property and the 149-acre Dutra Ranch.

These purchases preserved vast acreage as open space. And they locked up the Contra Costa Feeder Trail, which precluded any access for development on the ridge.

The total cost of these purchases was more than \$1.8 million. Batt was the driving force behind the fund-raising, obtaining government and foundation grants and individual gifts.

While leading this effort, she also got the Trust for Public Land to donate \$617,000 for purchase of the 240-acre Pacheco Marsh at the mouth of the Walnut Creek Channel.

The land trust then quested for a regional identity. The board changed the name to the Muir Heritage Land Trust, actively solicited support in the Lamorinda area, and sought out West County partnerships.

This lead to the trust's single biggest acquisition: the 702-acre Fernandez property, contiguous to a collar of land around Franklin Canyon Golf Course, proposed for development. The Fernandez family chose to sell directly to the land trust rather than option it to the developer as mitigation.

The price was \$3.2 million. Batt spearheaded a two-year fund-raising effort for the money. The trust celebrated the purchase June 10, with a thank you to donors at the site.

This is quite a record for a single mom who just wanted to get involved on a local planning committee. She rallied talented people and raised millions of dollars to preserve thousands of acres as open space.

Our community owes her a debt of gratitude for this enduring legacy.

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