

Rancho Palos Verdes, Conservancy set to finalize contract for preserve

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More than 10 years after the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy first began restoring open space for Rancho Palos Verdes, the two are set to agree on a management contract for a city open-space preserve that is nine times bigger than it was a decade ago.

The long-awaited agreement, before the City Council Tuesday night, formalizes the conservancy's efforts to restore and maintain habitat in what is now known as the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve.

The conservancy first began working with the city in 2001, managing the 155-acre Forrestral Reserve, which was the first of 10 properties acquired by Rancho Palos Verdes to form the larger, 1,400-acre preserve.

Since then, the city's vision for an ocean-view preserve - designed under a state program that allows protected habitat to be developed if nearby open space is set aside - has been realized. The city in 2009 purchased 190 acres known as the Upper Filiorum, the last link in a chain of hillside properties that offer sweeping ocean views and quiet trails.

Meanwhile, the land conservancy has been evolving from a nonprofit advocacy organization that formed in 1988, with a long-shot dream to maintain open space, into a full-fledged habitat restoration and management group.

Conservancy board President Ken Swenson said the new agreement with the city is both a formality and a milestone.

"It's huge for us to continue our connection to the land we worked so hard to

preserve," Swenson said.

The city, he said, gets a good deal from the conservancy. Under an agreement with state and federal wildlife agencies called the Natural Community Conservation Planning, or NCCP, the city must restore at least 5 acres of its preserve land per year. Much of that land includes depleted coastal sage scrub, a plant community that's home to a threatened bird called the coastal California gnatcatcher.

The NCCP agreement, like the land conservancy contract, has taken a long time to finalize. It's expected to be approved by the city and wildlife agencies early next year. In the NCCP agreement, the land conservancy is the designated habitat manager for the preserve.

The required 5 acres of restoration work could cost the city nearly three times as much if Rancho Palos Verdes contracted with an outside, private company instead of the conservancy, Swenson said. The current low cost to the city is

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made possible in part because the conservancy funds its work through grants and private donations - many from local residents.

The city paid about \$126,000 in the last fiscal year to the conservancy for work that costs \$336,000 in total, according to a municipal staff report.

Community Development Director Joel Rojas, who oversees the relationship between the city and the conservancy, said the general parameters of the city's payment were set when the NCCP agreement was worked out, and the figures have not been challenged since then.

Swenson argued the city's contract with the conservancy is of benefit to both parties and the community as a whole.

"We believe it's important to have a local group like ours because we're able to generate the volunteers, to connect our community with the land, and do all of our programs, which a third party is not going to do," Swenson said. "This way we keep the jobs local."

The agreement is for a 50-year period, retroactive to 2004, when the NCCP was first drafted. It brings together the original 2001 Forrestal agreement between the city and conservancy with three subsequent amendments.

The contract is more detailed in outlining the responsibilities of the conservancy and of the city, which must provide public safety in the form of park rangers, trash service, maintenance of improved roads and trails, and brush clearance for fire prevention. In addition to meeting annual habitat restoration expectations, the conservancy must maintain trails and trail signage, among other duties.

Rojas said the contract needed to be fairly specific because it will stretch for such a long time period.

The agreement comes just a week before an election that will bring three new City Council members to the panel because of term limits for current council members. Many of the seven actively campaigning candidates have expressed support for the city's open space but have questioned a reliance on outside contractors.

Swenson said he felt the conservancy could work well with any of the candidates who might make up the new council.

Rojas said he expected the council vote on the agreement to go smoothly.

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