



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

LAND USE AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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First District

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Second District

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Third District

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Fourth District

JIM DESMOND
Fifth District

DATE: April 9, 2025 and May 7, 2025

04

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

SANTA YSABEL COUNTY PRESERVE – APPROVE ACQUISITION OF APPROXIMATELY 540 ACRES OF OPEN SPACE PRESERVE FROM PALO VERDE LAND DEVELOPMENT, LP, A CALIFORNIA LIMITED PARTNERSHIP, AND RELATED CEQA EXEMPTION ([4/9/2025] – SET HEARING; [5/7/2025] – HOLD HEARING) (DISTRICT: 5)

OVERVIEW

The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) enhances the quality of life in San Diego County by providing exceptional parks and recreation experiences and preserving significant natural resources. A core aspect of DPR's conservation program is acquiring open space lands that support sensitive species and habitats. DPR has identified approximately 540 acres to expand the existing Santa Ysabel County Preserve and contribute towards DPR's goal of acquiring 500 acres of land per year. If acquired, the existing approximately 6,900-acre Santa Ysabel County Preserve would be expanded to approximately 7,440 acres, conserving chamise chaparral, Engelmann oak woodland, and grassland habitat to help protect sensitive species, including mountain lion, mule deer, Stephen's kangaroo rat, and Engelmann oak.

This acquisition enhances conservation under the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) set by federal and state requirements for special-status species conservation. It also supports multiple County of San Diego (County) sustainability goals, habitat and biodiversity, biological connectivity, greenhouse gas reductions, and benefits water and air quality. Additionally, conservation of the property provides flood control benefits and protection of water quality.

The County entered into an Option Agreement with Palo Verde Land Development, LP (Seller), a California limited partnership for the purchase of approximately 540 acres identified as Assessor's Parcel Numbers 248-010-05, 246-090-11, 248-010-06, and 248-090-10 (Property) for the appraised value of \$5,115,000 (\$9,500±/acre). The Property is subject to Agricultural Land Conservation Contract AP 81-08 made and entered into as of April 30, 1973, as amended by that First Amendment to Land Conservation Contract made and entered into as of January 26, 1982.

Today's request is for the County Board of Supervisors (Board) to set a hearing on April 9, 2025, to consider approval of the purchase of the Property, and to direct the Clerk of the Board to provide public notice of the hearing. If the Board approves this request, then on May 7, 2025, after making the necessary findings, the Board will be asked to authorize the Director, Department of General

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Services, to purchase the Property from the Seller for the appraised value of \$5,115,000. The total one-time County cost, including property acquisition, staff time, and initial stewardship, is \$5,754,500. Funds for one-time costs are included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-25 Operational Plan of the MSCP Acquisition Fund. The annual costs to manage the Property are \$185,948, including ongoing stewardship, fire abatement, and supervision of the Preserve. These ongoing costs are included in the FY 2025-26 CAO Recommended Operational Plan for the Department of Parks and Recreation.

RECOMMENDATION(S)
CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

On April 9, 2025:

1. Set a hearing for May 7, 2025, at which time the Board of Supervisors (Board) may authorize the Director, Department of General Services (DGS), to exercise the option to purchase real property identified as Assessor Parcel Numbers (APNs) 248-010-05, 246-090-11, 248-010-06, and 248-090-10 from Palo Verde Land Development, LP, a California limited partnership for the appraised value of \$5,115,000.
2. Direct the Clerk of the Board to provide notice of the May 7, 2025 hearing via publication of notice as required by law.

If, on April 9, 2025, the Board takes the actions recommended in Items 1-2 above, then on May 7, 2025:

1. Find that the proposed acquisition of real property identified as APNs 248-010-05, 246-090-11, 248-010-06, and 248-090-10 are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15301, 15311, 15313, 15316, and 15325 of the State CEQA Guidelines.
2. Find that the acquisition of real property identified as APNs 48-010-05, 246-090-11, 248-010-06, and 248-090-10 is not based primarily on a consideration of the lower cost of acquiring land in an agricultural preserve and there is no other land within or outside the agricultural preserve that would have provided an acceptable substitute for the property being acquired.
3. Authorize the Director, DGS, or designee, to exercise the option to purchase real property identified as APNs 248-010-05, 246-090-11, 248-010-06, and 248-090-10 from Palo Verde Land Development, LP, a California limited partnership for the appraised value of \$5,115,000.
4. Authorize the Director, DGS, or designee, to execute all documents, including escrow documents, necessary to complete the purchase of real property identified as APNs 248-010-05, 246-090-11, 248-010-06, and 248-090-10.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

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The Department of Parks and Recreation Conservation Program’s acquisition of properties with high-quality habitat is anticipated to result in positive public health impacts by improving water and air quality for all residents. The acquisition of the Property is within the Santa Ysabel and Julian community areas and will contribute acreage to multiple sustainability efforts, including expanding the draft North County Multiple Species Conservation Plan preserve area by approximately 540 acres and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 680 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year, equivalent to taking 160 cars off the road per year. The acquisition of conservation land reduces emissions that would have occurred if the land were developed and prevents the loss of critical habitat.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The proposed acquisition supports multiple County of San Diego (County) Sustainability Goals. Acquisition of the approximately 540-acre property supports County Sustainability Goal No. 3 and the County’s Climate Action Plan by contributing to greenhouse gas reductions by approximately 680 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year through preservation of open space. The proposed acquisition site supports County Sustainability Goal No. 4 by expanding opportunities for community members to access outdoor recreation and nature and County Sustainability Goal No. 6 by expanding open space adjacent to native ecosystems and habitats.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-25 Operational Plan in the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Acquisition Fund. If approved on May 7, 2025, this request will result in total one-time project costs for the Property of \$5,754,500 in FY 2024-25, which includes \$5,115,000 for property acquisition; \$150,000 staff time and appraisal reports to complete the transaction; \$10,000 for closing and title costs; and \$479,500 in one-time land improvement costs (including \$430,000 for comprehensively updating the existing Santa Ysabel County Preserve Resource Management Plan and initial species monitoring, and \$49,500 to conduct initial stewardship that features signage, access control, and vegetation management, land surveying, and other supplies and services and ongoing management). The funding source is available prior year General Fund fund balance (\$5,754,500) in the MSCP Acquisition Fund. There is no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years in FY 2024-25.

Total annual ongoing costs for assessments, monitoring, operations, and management of the Property are estimated at \$185,948, itemized as follows: approximately \$15,000 for adaptive management and biological monitoring, \$72,450 for annual total operating costs for managing the site, and the salary and benefit costs of \$98,498 for existing staff. Ongoing costs and funding sources are included in the FY 2025-26 CAO Recommended Operational Plan in the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). The funding source is existing General Purpose Revenue in DPR. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

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ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The Department of Parks and Recreation's (DPR) mission is to enhance the quality of life in San Diego County by providing exceptional parks and recreation experiences and preserving significant natural resources. The San Diego region has one of the most diverse habitats in the United States, with over 200 special-status species inhabiting the region. These species are listed or are candidates to be listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act, California Endangered Species Act, State Species of Special Concern, or are found on other watch lists. In support of DPR's mission to conserve at least 500 acres per year of biologically valuable native habitats and wildlife for current and future generations to enjoy, DPR focuses on conservation through many different program elements. A key element in DPR's conservation program is the acquisition, management, and monitoring of open space lands to protect and preserve sensitive resources and to provide additional opportunities for passive recreation to enhance the quality of life for community members and build healthier communities.

The County of San Diego (County) identified approximately 540 acres of open space land in Santa Ysabel (Property) that met the criteria for conservation. The Property is subject to Agricultural Land Conservation Contract AP 81-08 made and entered into as of April 30, 1973, as amended by that First Amendment to Land Conservation Contract made and entered into as of January 26, 1982. California Government Code Section 51292 requires a public agency to make the following findings to acquire property within an agricultural preserve: 1) the acquisition of the property is not based primarily on a consideration of the lower cost of acquiring land in an agricultural preserve and 2) there is no other land within or outside the Ramona Agricultural Preserve Number 9 that would have provided an acceptable substitute for the property being acquired.

The Property is being acquired because it contributes to regional conservation due to the high-quality habitat and biodiversity, biological connectivity, access, and value. Further, the Property is directly adjacent to the existing Santa Ysabel County Preserve and provides connectivity to public lands by expanding the existing Santa Ysabel County Preserve to the north. If acquired, the existing approximately 6,900-acre Santa Ysabel County Preserve would be expanded to over 7,440 acres. Acquiring this land will conserve large, adjacent areas of chamise chaparral, Engelmann oak woodland, and grassland habitat.

This acquisition meets the DPR standard for conservation under the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) set by federal and State requirements for special-status species conservation. DPR evaluates multiple factors when considering open space land for potential acquisition and inclusion into County Preserves, including biology, connectivity, accessibility, and value. The Property includes quality habitat that supports regional biodiversity and is within the draft North County MSCP Plan Area. Connectivity is another factor DPR considers. The Property's connectivity to the existing Santa Ysabel County Preserve makes long-term management and stewardship more efficient because the same operational team can perform those functions. The

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contiguity between the Property and Santa Ysabel County Preserve allows for conservation of the habitat and wildlife corridors. Accessibility to acquired lands is another factor considered. DPR must be able to access all its lands to meet stewardship and monitoring requirements as well as provide potential access to the public for passive recreation and environmental education where appropriate. The Property is accessible for proper stewardship, monitoring, and management needs. Lastly, DPR considers financial and economic value to ensure that public resources are wisely invested. The appraised value of the approximately 540 acres is \$5,115,000 (\$9,500±/acre), which has been determined to be fair and reasonable.

On October 28, 2020 (6), the County Board of Supervisors (Board) directed staff to develop a plan for the draft North County MSCP Plan Area, like the plan that is currently in place for the South County MSCP Subarea Plan. The draft North County MSCP Plan covers the northwestern portion of the unincorporated area and is anticipated to be complete by Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26. The eastern portion of the unincorporated area is covered by the future East County MSCP. Each MSCP Plan is designed to meet the needs of the habitats and species located within its respective Plan Area's unique geography. All three MSCP Plans comprise the County's MSCP Program.

Through the County's MSCP Program, the County has acquired over 47,300 acres of open space land for conservation within the three MSCP Subareas. The acreage of preserve lands within the three MSCP Plan Areas include approximately 14,300 acres within the South County Plan Area, 25,800 acres within the draft North County Plan Area, and 7,200 acres within the proposed East County Plan Area. This acquisition would add 540 acres to the draft North County Plan Area and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 680 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year.

DPR's analysis of potential open space acquisitions includes a sustainability perspective with a cross-departmental Acquisition Roundtable team consisting of staff from the Land Use & Environment Group, Department of General Services, the Department of Public Works, the Department of Environmental Health and Quality (DEHQ), Planning & Development Services, and Agriculture, Weights and Measures. The team reviews open space acquisitions from multiple perspectives to assess benefits for regional conservation and County priorities. This coordination ensures alignment with the County's sustainability efforts including habitat and species conservation, connectivity, public access, flood and stormwater control, fire risk reduction, groundwater conservation, water and air quality, and achievement of greenhouse gas emission reductions and other climate goals under the Climate Action Plan (CAP) update and Regional Decarbonization Framework. The proposed acquisition supports the 2024 CAP Measure A-1.1 goal of preserving 1,100 acres of open space land per year that could otherwise be developed and reducing greenhouse gas emissions as well as adding preserve acreage to the draft North County Plan Area. DEHQ reviewed the site and confirmed the site is environmentally sound. Additionally, conservation of the property provides flood control benefits and protection of water quality.

Today's request is for the Board to set a hearing for May 7, 2025 to consider approval of the purchase of the Property and direct the Clerk of the Board to provide public notice of the hearing.

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If the Board approves this request, then on May 7, 2025, after making the necessary findings, the Board will be requested to authorize the Director, Department of General Services, to purchase the Property from Palo Verde Land Development, LP, for the appraised value of \$5,115,000. The total one-time County cost, including property acquisition, staff time, and initial stewardship, is \$5,754,500. Funds for this request are included in the FY 2024-25 Operational Plan of the Multiple Species Conservation Program Acquisition Fund. The annual costs to manage the Property are \$185,948, including ongoing stewardship, fire abatement, and supervision of the preserve. These ongoing costs are included in the FY 2025-26 CAO Recommended Operational Plan.

ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT

Acquisition of the Property and associated actions are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301 (Existing Facilities), 15311 (Accessory Structures), 15313 (Acquisition of Lands for Wildlife Conservation Purposes), 15316 (Transfer of Ownership of Land in Order to Create Parks), and 15325 (Transfers of Ownership of Interest in Land to Preserve Existing Natural Conditions and Historical Resources).

Section 15301 is applicable because initial stewardship activities may include repair of existing fencing and signage. Additionally, fuel management activities will be performed to ensure conformance with applicable fire code standards. Section 15311 is appropriate because new on-site signage may be needed. Sections 15313 and 15325 are applicable because the land is being acquired for preservation of natural resources. Section 15316 is applicable because the land is being acquired for park purposes, the land is in natural condition, and no management plan has been prepared.

The project is not subject to any of the exceptions to Categorical Exemptions listed in Section 15300.2 of the CEQA Guidelines. Any new uses of the Property will be subject to funding and environmental review.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action to acquire land for conservation purposes supports the Sustainability Initiative in the County of San Diego's 2025–2030 Strategic Plan by protecting natural resources, diverse habitats, and sensitive species, as well as providing recreational opportunities that enrich residents' quality of life.

Respectfully submitted,



DAHVIA LYNCH

Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment A – Location Map

Attachment B – Site Map