



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

LAND USE AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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DATE: March 25, 2026 and April 22, 2026

06

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

IRON MOUNTAIN COUNTY PRESERVE – APPROVE ACQUISITION OF APPROXIMATELY 380 ACRES OF OPEN SPACE PRESERVE FROM POWAY IRON MOUNTAIN ESTATES AND RELATED CEQA EXEMPTION ([3/25/2026] – SET HEARING; [4/22/2026] – HOLD HEARING) (DISTRICT: 2)

OVERVIEW

The County of San Diego (County) 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 to balance the conservation of plant and animal species with recreation, housing, development, and agricultural activities within the San Diego region.

DPR has identified approximately 380 acres to expand the existing Iron Mountain County Preserve, contribute toward DPR's goal of acquiring 500 acres of land per year, and ensure compliance with the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) goals. If acquired, the existing approximately 160-acre Iron Mountain County Preserve (Preserve) would be expanded to approximately 540 acres, conserving Diegan coastal sage scrub, chamise chaparral, and southern mixed chaparral habitat to help protect sensitive species, including Belding's orange-throated whiptail, Blainville's horned lizard, Cooper's hawk, and mule deer. Conserving these lands also supports housing by ensuring that development can be streamlined under the MSCP permit for compatible projects.

This acquisition would enhance conservation under the MSCP set by federal and State requirements for special-status species conservation. It would also support multiple County sustainability goals, habitat and biodiversity, biological connectivity, greenhouse gas reductions, and housing. Additionally, conservation of the property would provide flood control benefits and protection of water and air quality. The acquisition will add about 380 acres to the adopted MSCP South County Subarea Plan (Plan), contributing toward the remaining 16,262 acres needed to reach the Plan's 98,379-acre conservation goal. Additional benefits include supporting the County's Climate Action Plan through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 480 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year, equivalent to taking about 90 cars off the road per year.

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The County entered into an Option Agreement with the Poway Iron Mountain Estates, LLC (Seller) for the purchase of approximately 380 acres identified as Assessor’s Parcel Numbers 322-011-05-00, a portion of 322-011-06-00, 322-040-04-00, and 322-041-06-00 (Property) for the appraised value of \$4,424,000 (approximately \$11,750/acre). If approved, DPR will enter into a Memorandum of Agreement with the City of Poway to manage the Property for the County.

Today’s request is for the County Board of Supervisors (Board) to set a hearing for April 22, 2026, 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 April 22, 2026, after making the necessary findings, the Board will be asked to authorize the Director, Department of General Services to purchase the Property from the Seller for the appraised value of \$4,424,000. The total one-time County cost, including property acquisition, staff time, and initial stewardship is \$4,924,000. Funds for one-time costs are included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26 Operational Plan. The annual costs to manage the Property are \$74,000, including ongoing stewardship, fire abatement, and supervision of the Preserve, which are also included in the FY 2025-26 Operational Plan. The Board is also requested to authorize the Director of DPR to execute a Memorandum of Agreement with the City of Poway to manage the Property.

RECOMMENDATION(S)
CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER
On March 25, 2026:

1. Set a hearing for April 22, 2026, for the County of San Diego (County) Board of Supervisors (Board) to authorize the Director, Department of General Services (DGS), to exercise the Option Agreement to purchase real property identified as Assessor Parcel Numbers (APNs) 322-011-05-00, a portion of 322-011-06-00, 322-040-04-00, and 322-041-06-00 from the Poway Iron Mountain Estates, LLC for the appraised value of \$4,424,000.
2. Direct the Clerk of the Board to provide notice of the April 22, 2026 hearing via publication of notice as required by law.

If, on March 25, 2026, the Board takes the actions recommended in Items 1-2 above, then on April 22, 2026:

1. Find that the proposed acquisition of real property identified as APNs 322-011-05-00, a portion of 322-011-06-00, 322-040-04-00, and 322-041-06-00 is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15301, 15311, 15313, 15316, and 15325 of the State CEQA Guidelines.
2. Authorize the Director, DGS, or designee, to exercise the Option Agreement to purchase real property identified as APNs 322-011-05-00, a portion of 322-011-06-00, 322-040-04-00, and 322-041-06-00 from the Poway Iron Mountain Estates, LLC for the appraised value of \$4,424,000.

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3. Authorize the Director, DGS, or designee, to execute all documents, including escrow documents, necessary to complete the purchase of real property identified as APNs 322-011-05-00, a portion of 322-011-06-00, 322-040-04-00, and 322-041-06-00.
4. Authorize the Director, Department of Parks and Recreation, to execute a Memorandum of Agreement with the City of Poway for the City’s management of the Property, and to take any actions necessary to administer the agreement.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

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 community areas of Ramona and Poway and will contribute acreage to multiple sustainability efforts, including expanding the adopted MSCP South County Subarea Plan Area by approximately 380 acres and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 480 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year, equivalent to taking about 90 cars off the road per year. Acquisition of conservation land reduces emissions that would have occurred if the land were developed and prevents the loss of critical habitat. Under the MSCP, the County partners with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to ensure the unincorporated area’s rich biodiversity is conserved while allowing housing development to occur through the County’s permitting process. The MSCP allows private development projects that meet MSCP requirements to rely on the County’s permits under the Federal Endangered Species Act, California Endangered Species Act, and State Natural Community Conservation Planning Act, eliminating the need for individual project-by-project permitting under these regulations. This streamlines development and housing timelines and reduces project costs by balancing development with conservation at a regional scale.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The proposed acquisition will contribute to multiple County of San Diego (County) Sustainability Goals. Acquisition of the approximately 380-acre property supports County Sustainability Goal No. 3 and the County’s Climate Action Plan by contributing to greenhouse gas reductions by approximately 480 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year through preservation of open space. The proposed acquisition also 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. By conserving the property under the MSCP, this action balances regional habitat conservation with housing development by streamlining environmental permitting and focusing development in less environmentally sensitive areas. This provides more opportunities for housing development, supporting the County’s General Plan goals and meeting the Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA).

FISCAL IMPACT

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Funds for this request are included in the FY 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Acquisition Fund and Finance Other. If approved on April 22, 2026, this request will result in total one-time project costs for the Property of \$4,924,000 in FY 2025-26, which includes \$4,424,000 for property acquisition; \$40,000 staff time and appraisal reports to complete the transaction; \$10,000 for closing and title costs; and \$450,000 in one-time land improvement costs (including \$350,000 for comprehensively updating the existing Iron Mountain County Preserve Resource Management Plan and initial species monitoring, and \$100,000 to conduct initial stewardship that features signage, access control, vegetation management, land surveying, and other supplies and services and ongoing management). The funding source is available prior year General Fund fund balance in the MSCP Acquisition Fund (\$2,924,000) and Unlocked Reserves (\$2,000,000). On March 3, 2026 (13), the Board approved the recommendation of Unlocked Reserves for MSCP. There is no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years in FY 2025-26.

Total annual ongoing costs for assessments, monitoring, operations, and management of the Property are estimated at \$74,000: approximately \$20,000 for adaptive management and biological monitoring, and \$54,000 for operating and management costs of the site. Ongoing costs and funding sources are included in DPR’s FY 2025-26 Adopted Operational Plan based on existing General Purpose Revenue (GPR).

If approved, the County will enter into a Memorandum of Agreement with the City of Poway for management of the Property, excluding habitat monitoring activities required by the MSCP, which will be managed by the County. If Poway should ever cease to manage the Property, the County’s estimated annual costs would increase by \$16,500 for ongoing operations and maintenance, for a total of \$90,500. The funding source would be DPR GPR and would be included in future Operational Plans.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

This action would support the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP), which benefits development throughout the region by streamlining permitting for projects that meet MSCP requirements. Streamlined permitting positively impacts economic development, housing, and businesses that are required to complete biological mitigation in accordance with State and federal regulations.

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

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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.

On April 8, 2015 (2), the Board of Supervisors (Board) adopted a resolution declaring a partnership between the County of San Diego (County) and the City of Poway (City) to pursue funding sources to expand the Iron Mountain Open Space Area managed by the City. Both jurisdictions expressed a commitment to protecting the area’s pristine lands and allowing access to public lands where appropriate. While much of the land forming the Iron Mountain Open Space Area is in the City of Poway, several hundred acres are in the unincorporated area in the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) South County Subarea Plan. Iron Mountain Open Space Area is also a popular hiking destination, and property acquisition in the surrounding area could provide additional opportunities for public access. On August 7, 2019 (1), the Board authorized the Director, DPR, to execute a Memorandum of Agreement with the City for its management of the Property and to take any actions necessary to administer the agreement.

The County identified approximately 380 acres of open space land in Poway (Property) that met the criteria for conservation. 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 Iron Mountain County Preserve and would expand County management and ownership of regional trails in the area. If acquired, the existing approximately 160-acre Iron Mountain County Preserve would be expanded to approximately 540 acres, conserving Diegan coastal sage scrub, chamise chaparral, and southern mixed chaparral habitat to help protect sensitive species, including Belding’s orange-throated whiptail, Blainville’s horned lizard, Cooper’s hawk, and mule deer. The proposed acquisition provides an opportunity to update the Biodiversity Report, Cultural Resources Report, Vegetation Management, and Resource Management Plan for the entire Iron Mountain County Preserve.

This acquisition meets the DPR’s standard for conservation under the 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 would contribute to the South County MSCP Plan Area. Connectivity is another factor DPR considers. The Property’s connectivity to the existing Iron Mountain County Preserve makes long-term management and stewardship more efficient because the same operational team can perform those functions. The contiguity between the Property and Iron Mountain County Preserve allows for conservation of the habitat and wildlife corridors. Access to acquired lands is another factor considered. DPR must be able to access its lands to meet stewardship and monitoring requirements, as well as potential access to the public for passive

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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 380 acres is \$4,424,000 (approximately \$11,750/acre), which has been determined to be fair and reasonable.

The unincorporated area of San Diego county is comprised of three MSCP Plan Areas: the adopted South County Subarea Plan, the draft North County Plan, and the future East County Plan. Each MSCP Plan is designed to meet the needs of habitats and species located within its respective Plan area's unique geography. All three MSCP Plans comprise the County's MSCP Program. The Property is within the adopted MSCP South County Subarea Plan Area. The MSCP is a long-term, regional habitat conservation program focused on balancing the protection of plant and animal species with recreation, development, housing, and agricultural activities within San Diego county. This unique regional conservation program works across jurisdictional boundaries, protects watersheds and water quality, and accommodates future growth by simplifying building regulations. The MSCP provides the basis for the County to receive an incidental take permit from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Wildlife Agencies), which can be issued under the Federal and State Endangered Species Acts for compatible projects that might result in impacts to endangered or threatened species or their habitats. Permitting authority provided through the MSCP allows the County to directly issue permits to development projects that comply with the MSCP, so that those projects do not have to secure their own incidental take permits from the Wildlife Agencies. This is one way the MSCP streamlines permitting, supports regional conservation of natural habitats, and facilitates economic growth in the unincorporated area. The MSCP requires that the timing of habitat conservation through land acquisitions is balanced with development, occurring in rough step of one another.

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 includes about 14,300 acres within the South County Plan Area; 26,400 acres within the draft North County MSCP Plan Area; and 7,200 acres within the proposed East County Plan Area. This acquisition would add 380 acres to the adopted South County Plan Area and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 480 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 (DGS), 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,

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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 adopted South County Plan Area. DEHQ reviewed the site and confirmed that the site is environmentally sound. Additionally, conservation of the property provides flood control benefits and protection of water quality. Preserving the site's native habitat and soil surfaces allows for absorption of rainwater, filtering out pollutants, and reducing the risk of flooding with less storm runoff.

Today's request is for the Board to set a hearing for April 22, 2026, to consider approval of the purchase of the Property and direct the Clerk of the Board to provide public notice of the hearing. If the Board approves this request, then on April 22, 2026, after making the necessary findings, the Board will be requested to authorize the Director, DGS, to purchase the Property from Poway Iron Mountain Estates, LLC (Seller) for the appraised value of \$4,424,000. The total one-time County cost, including property acquisition, staff time, and initial stewardship, is \$4,924,000. Funds for this request are included in the FY 2025-26 Operational Plan. The annual costs to manage the Property are \$74,000, including ongoing stewardship, fire abatement, and supervision of the Preserve. These ongoing costs are included in the FY 2025-26 Operational Plan.

The Board is also requested to authorize the Director, DPR, to execute a Memorandum of Agreement with the City of Poway for Poway to manage the Property. The County's ongoing cost for land monitoring and adaptive management to adhere to South County MSCP requirements and fixed charge assessments is estimated at \$74,000 per year beginning in Fiscal Year 2025-26 and will be funded by existing General Purpose Revenue included in the DPR. If the City of Poway should cease to manage the Property and pay for associated costs, the County would bear this responsibility, increasing ongoing County costs by \$16,500 to an estimated total of \$90,500 per year for ongoing operations and maintenance, which would be included in future Operational Plans.

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 the 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 the preservation of natural resources. Section 15316 is applicable because the land is

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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 and Equity Initiatives in the County of San Diego’s 2026–2031 Strategic Plan by protecting natural resources, diverse habitats, and sensitive species, as well as streamlining permitting for development and housing, and 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