

MORE OPEN SPACE PRESERVED

Once slated for residential development, a piece of land near O’Neill Regional Park in Trabuco Canyon has been purchased and preserved as natural habitat by the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA). TCA, the government agency that operates The Toll Roads of Orange County, bought the nearly 33-acre parcel known as Saddle Club for \$3.7 million in December.

According to Valarie McFall, TCA’s chief environmental planning officer, TCA will preserve the land in perpetuity, ensuring it remains undeveloped for future generations. TCA balances the impact of construction of The Toll Roads by setting aside or re-establishing native habitat in areas near the roads. TCA will “bank” the preserved habitat at Saddle Club and use it as credit for future projects – which could include adding interchanges or widening roads.

The land, located east of the 241 Toll Road between Live Oak Canyon Road and Trabuco Canyon Road, is home to self-sustaining oak, coastal sage scrub and riparian habitats. It provides an important link for birds and animals to access a natural corridor extending to the Cleveland National Forest.

Since 1990, TCA has set aside more than 2,200 acres of land at 16 different Orange County locations, protecting each in perpetuity for future generations.

COMMUNITY INPUT HELPS TCA PLAN PUBLIC ACCESS FOR SADDLE CLUB PROPERTY

TCA typically has limited public access on its preserves to protect threatened species. But, with the Saddle Club property, TCA is doing things a little differently. The property near O’Neill Regional Park is slated to be the first of TCA’s open spaces to allow continuous recreational usage.

The Saddleback Canyon Riders, a group of about 100 horse owners living in the rural canyon areas near Saddle Club, welcomed TCA’s openness to ideas from the community on how the land might combine habitat preservation with recreational use.

“We were glad that TCA asked us for input,” said Saddleback Canyon Riders President Jim Iacono. “Though our main goal is to keep the area’s equestrian bent, we realize there are many ways that the land could be used, such as a community farm or housing horse therapy programs, that benefit the entire community.”

Rich Gomez, head of emergency planning for the equestrian group, acknowledges the importance of preserving land for wildlife uses. “But it’s also important to expose people to it. There are ways that wildlife habitat can be combined with other uses and provide a diversity of activities,” Gomez said.

TCA is considering the group’s ideas for how the property might be used in the future. The land formerly known as Live Oak Stables has been a hub for equestrian and agricultural activities for several decades. Club members recall boarding their horses and attending equestrian, team roping and cattle-sorting events in the early 1990s.

TCA’s early engagement with local groups like the Saddleback Canyon Riders makes sense. Since its establishment in 1991, the equestrian group has earned a reputation as engaged community members willing to help a neighbor out. The group’s volunteers patrol and help maintain trails in O’Neill Regional Park and, together with area agencies, have developed a proven emergency evacuation plan for the entire community that TCA has agreed to support.

The group’s members are looking forward to the public access plan that TCA develops over the next year. Even though a date for when the property will be open to the public has yet to be identified, the fact that TCA is willing to work with the community on access goes a long way.



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TheTollRoads.com

The Toll Roads (State Routes 73, 133, 241 and 261 in Orange County, California) are property of the state, maintained by Caltrans and operated by the Transportation Corridor Agencies, a government agency created by the state legislature in 1986.