

Park putting down roots

After 16 years, Otay Valley to get trail, ranger station

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CHULA VISTA – It has been a long wait, but after more than 16 years of preparation, the Otay Valley Regional Park is close to unveiling its first trail and park ranger station.

The park, which makes up most of Chula Vista's south greenbelt, is being developed by the county of San Diego and the cities of Chula Vista and San Diego.

Since the joint-powers agreement was signed in 1990, much work has been done – including land acquisition and a massive trash-collection project – but very little of it was visible to the public.

That's changing.

A major milestone took place in November, when the park dedicated its first completed site: the Finney Interpretive Overlook, a cliff-side viewpoint.

The next milestone will be in June, when a ranger station opens at Beyer Boulevard. It will be the first of six planned “staging areas” from which the public can access the park.

“I was a big supporter of that – get something built,” said John Willett, chairman of the citizens advisory committee for the park.

The ranger station will include a public meeting room and parking. Nearby will be the first section of completed trail way, nearly a mile of wide paths winding through the brush from Beyer Boulevard to Beyer Way.

San Diego County Supervisor Greg Cox for years has championed the park project, which he first proposed when he was mayor of Chula Vista in the 1980s.

“We are really reclaiming an area that has been severely degraded over the years,” Cox said. “Once we're able to complete more sections, then I think the public will start getting a better idea of what it's about.”

In the coming year, another six miles of trails will be developed. In mid-December, the county Board of Supervisors voted to seek bids for that part of the project, which is expected to cost between \$5 million and \$6 million.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Volunteer John Willett leads a cleanup effort to remove tons of trash in what is becoming the Otay Valley Regional Park. He is excited that a ranger station will open in the park in June. “I was a big supporter of that - get something built.”

In 1989, then-Mayor Cox, then-San Diego Councilman Bob Filner and then-County Supervisor Brian Bilbray proposed the idea for the Otay Valley Regional Park. The county and San Diego and Chula Vista signed the agreement the following year.

Officials looked beyond the layers of trash and homeless encampments and saw potential in the Otay River Valley's rich stock of wildlife and native plants. The first step was to find money and begin acquiring land.

Meanwhile, years of illegally dumped trash – mattresses, tires, industrial debris and household waste – had to be removed. Officials also had to fix storm-water runoff that was polluting the river.

Willett, who is retired from the Navy and civil service, is a full-time volunteer on the cleanup project. He coordinates trash removal with a crew of inmates from the Donovan Correctional Facility. He said they have cleared out 1,367 tons of trash since 1999.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
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Today those efforts are bearing fruit. The park is teeming with birds and animals that forage in ponds left by gravel and sand extraction. Skunks and California ground squirrels – even the occasional bobcat or raccoon – roam among the scrub trees. Western rattlesnakes have been spotted.

And it's a bird-watcher's delight, with species including the California least tern, California gnatcatcher and the Western meadowlark. On one afternoon in late December, Willett counted 62 mallards flying over Hollister Pond.

During the past decade, officials developed plans for preserving native plants, protecting wild animals and rooting out invasive species.

A general plan for the park envisions playing fields, picnic areas and interpretive centers connected by a web of hiking, biking and some equestrian trails. As the lead agency, the county is in the process of developing more detailed plans for those recreation areas, Cox said.

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About \$18.6 million has been spent on the park, culled from a variety of sources, including state bond issues for parks and watershed preservation.

Most of that money has been used to buy land. About 900 acres have been purchased, and thousands more will be deeded over by Otay Ranch Co. as a condition of developing its land, Cox said. As envisioned, the park will someday stretch from the southern tip of San Diego Bay to the Lower Otay Reservoir.

In some respects, the park's development is a family project. Willett's daughter is Cheryl Cox, the recently elected mayor of Chula Vista. As mayor, she will have opportunities to vote on the city's involvement in park issues. Cheryl Cox is married to Greg Cox.

Cheryl Cox also was involved in the park's development when she was a trustee of the Chula Vista Elementary School District. The school district cooperated in the project to develop the Finney Interpretive Overlook, which is just behind Finney Elementary School.

For more information on the park, visit www.ovrp.org.



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