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'Not one shovel': Save Oswit Canyon completes \$7.15M sale, land to be preserved and open to public

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More than four years of efforts to spare Oswit Canyon from residential development has culminated in the \$7.15 million sale of roughly 114 acres in south Palm Springs to a group of conservationists who rallied to preserve the land as open space.

Jane Garrison, the president and founder of Save Oswit Canyon, spoke to a socially distanced and mask-wearing crowd of about a dozen supporters Monday in a livestreamed press conference. She confirmed that the group's previously announced purchase of the land from the developers had closed.

Garrison, jubilant and emotional while wearing a t-shirt with the motto "More Sheep, Less Sprawl," thanked the thousands of supporters who signed petitions, donated funds or followed the preservation efforts.

While the land is now owned by Save Oswit Canyon, soon to be called the Oswit Land Trust, Garrison said the true victory is the land is now open to the public.

"This canyon belongs to all of us," Garrison said.

Shortly after purchase, the Save Oswit Canyon team removed the private property signs that dotted the canyon, signaling that the land is officially open to the public.

'Not one house, not one shovel'

Garrison, who has past experience as a business owner and volunteer coordinator around animal rescue efforts, began leading efforts to preserve Oswit Canyon after learning the land was planned for residential development while out on a hike in the area about five years ago.

Until then, she had not had a background in development or preservation.

“I just could not wrap my head around that someplace so special could be destroyed for more houses,” Garrison said.

Oswit Canyon is west of South Palm Canyon Drive at the base of the San Jacinto Mountains. The area is home to wildlife like desert fox, mountain lions and bighorn sheep, of which there’s only around 75 left in the local herd, Garrison said.

Back in 2006, the canyon was slated to be the site of the Eagle Canyon home development. But the project never broke ground, and then a proposal surfaced to revive the plan around 2016. Community opposition ensued.

More than 4,000 people signed a petition asking the city to rezone the land as an "environmentally sensitive area," which was slated to go to voters in a special election. But the Palm Springs City Council in 2017 voted to rezone the area, eliminating the need to put the measure on the ballot.

The rezoning effort spawned a lawsuit from the developers, for which the city covered legal costs. But Save Oswit Canyon persisted and kept negotiating with the developers.

Garrison said the developers attempted to make compromises, like limiting their development to 75 houses. There was a nearly eight-hour mediation last summer. But Garrison held fast.

“I said not one house, not one shovel,” she said.

Then in July 2019, the group announced that the developers had agreed to sell the land, providing the group could raise \$1 million by the end of that year to put toward the purchase.

Save Oswit Canyon secured \$1 million from the city of Palm Springs, and grants were secured by the Coachella Valley Mountain Conservancy from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Wildlife Conservation Board to put toward the sale.

Jim Karpiak, executive director of Coachella Valley Mountain Conservancy, said that preserving the canyon is “a huge step toward saving the peninsular bighorn sheep” while ensuring the land can be enjoyed by future generations.

Palm Springs Mayor Geoff Kors, as well as Councilmember Dennis Woods and former councilmember Ginny Foat, attended Monday's press conference.

In addition to extolling the beauty of the land, Kors said the canyon would not have been preserved but for the help of the community.

“It’s just one example of when a committed group of people come together, anything can happen,” he said.

Other land efforts ahead

Though the Oswit Canyon sale is closed, the organizers' efforts aren't done.

Garrison said that future funds will be required to maintain and preserve the land as well as pay associated bills. The group is still soliciting monthly donations via its website that it will use for future maintenance costs.

Save Oswit Canyon will officially be renamed Oswit Land Trust in the coming months, Garrison said.

The organizers are also setting their sights on other lands in the city that could be used by the public. Amid discussions about possible sales of city golf courses, Garrison said plans are in the works to develop a community park in their place.

“The desert is for sale, and other special places like this are rife for development,” Garrison said.

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