



Michael Sunday and Amy Hogan are part of a group of Petaluma residents trying to raise the money to preserve La Cresta Ridge, an undeveloped 14 acre parcel in southwest Petaluma that offers commanding views of the city.

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From La Cresta Ridge, the views of Petaluma are unrivalled.

Facts

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Save La Cresta Ridge and Ravine Coalition: www.slcr.org

The whole of town spreads out below, framed by rolling hills dotted with trees.

City landmarks are recognizable: the Hunt & Behrens granary on Lakeville Street, Highway 101 in the distance, St. Vincent's church bell tower near downtown.

Other features stand out, too: The quiet peacefulness, friendly dog walkers out for a stroll, a man picking blackberries from a huge wild bramble, deer, foxes and hawks living nearby. To the west lies the expansive Helen Putnam Park.

A small group of Petaluma residents are working to save the La Cresta hilltop and ravine on the southwestern edge of town from potential development.

"It's a big chunk of land and a gorgeous piece of land on top of that. That's about as good as it gets," said Michael Sunday, who helps organize Save La Cresta Ridge and Ravine Coalition volunteers.

The parcel, almost 14 acres, has been owned by a water company since the 1920s. California Water Service Co., or CalWater, is the largest investor-owned water utility west of the Mississippi River and the third largest in the country, according to its website.

The company isn't advertising its property for sale but is open to selling, Sunday said.

None of the parties would publicly put a value on the property because they are attempting to negotiate a sale, but estimates have ranged from \$1.8 million to about \$3 million.

The land is zoned light residential, meaning several homes could be built there. A proposal in 2006 to build 14 homes on the parcel was abandoned. Since then, the city has enacted an ordinance that restricts ridgetop building.

Sunday and other volunteers have been working with local land-preservation experts on how to buy the property and preserve it in its natural state.

They have a pledge of a \$1 million matching grant from the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District and are trying to raise money to buy the land.

CalWater is willing to sell to the volunteers but has said it will sell to anyone making an acceptable offer, Sunday said.

A spokesman for the company did not return a phone message seeking comment.

Volunteer Amy Hogan, who lives downhill from La Cresta Ridge, strolled along a paved path Friday with her daughter, Holly, and their dog, Sadie.

"This would connect people walking from the city with Helen Putnam," she said. "It would be so bad to build on this land with the soil movement and all the runoff."

Stu Martin, land acquisition specialist with the open space district, said La Cresta has several positive traits that make it valuable to preserve.

"It's so close to the city. It connects up other protected properties. The public has already used it informally. And we've got great local interest," he said. "All those things were certainly a plus when we gave the OK."

The volunteers made an offer in 2010 that included a steep discount from the owner that would have counted toward the volunteers' required matching funds. But CalWater rejected it, saying the property was worth significantly more, Martin said.

Raising funds has been difficult during the recession, Sunday said.

In the meantime, dog walkers and hikers continue to use the path that meanders through the property from the West Haven subdivision toward two large water tanks at the top of one of the hills.

"This is arguably the most valuable piece of open space left in town. There aren't very many left," Sunday said. "My hope is that we can get some kind of a board of local people who will get involved and find the money."