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Huge open space deal

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A huge, \$13 million open space purchase in southern Sonoma County doubles the size of the Tolay Lake Ranch park property and adds significantly to a 20,000-acre swath of publicly preserved grasslands and woods, marshes and meadows stretching from Highway 116 to San Pablo Bay.

A \$2 million contribution from the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District approved Tuesday by county supervisors allows the Sonoma Land Trust to fill in a missing puzzle piece on a mosaic of protected property at the southern entry to Sonoma Valley.

Purchase of 1,657 acres of the Roche family ranch leaves Infineon Raceway almost surrounded by property that is protected either by public ownership or by conservation easement. Members of the Roche family are retaining about 400 acres as part of their Carneros Estate Winery.

Wendy Eliot, conservation director at Sonoma Land Trust, said the agency will take title to the property, but in three to five years intends to turn it over to Sonoma County Regional Parks, thus tacking it on to the south side of the 1,737-acre Tolay Lake Ranch, purchased by a conservation group consortium in 2005 for \$18 million.

Tolay Lake currently is open to the public for guided hikes, but the county is completing a master plan calling for a major regional park at the site.

The Tolay and Roche ranches share a 3-mile boundary line. "It is our hope to add it to Tolay Lake park and almost double the size," Eliot said.

The property, which sits on the west side of Highway 121 across from the winery, emerged as a contentious issue during the winery's bankruptcy proceedings in 2005. San Francisco physicians Joseph and Genevieve Roche founded the winery in the late 1970s and in 1997 purchased the ranchland on the west side of the highway with the intention of expanding their vineyards that produce chardonnay and pinot noir grapes.

Negotiations during 2006 to sell the property to the Open Space District fell through and the Roche family sought bankruptcy court protection as a means of paying off creditors on their winery business. Later, negotiations with two bidders that offered \$15 million and \$16 million also fell through.

"We've loved it and always wanted it to be in open space," said Joseph Roche. "It will be a jewel in public property. The eventual restoration of Tolay Creek always has been a dream of mine."

His son, Brendan, who has operated the family winery in recent years, said the family "is just delighted that it has come to this point."

Eliot said funding for purchase includes \$5 million from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, a San Francisco organization that funds environmental and science projects in the Bay Area as well as other commitments from the California Coastal Conservancy and the California Wildlife Conservation Board.

Sonoma Land Trust already has extensive land holdings along Sonoma County's San Pablo Bay shoreline, including land once eyed as an Indian gaming casino, and the Dickson property, which have been turned into its Baylands restoration project. In addition, the area is adjacent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge and the state Department of Fish and Game's Napa-Sonoma marshes.

Marta Puente, an open space district planner, said one possibility is a 7-mile trail from the Tolay Lake park to the edge of the bay.

"Roche ranch provides essential habitat linkage from the bay to the Sonoma Mountain foothills," Puente said. "It could be developed with vineyards and estate homes, instead."

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