

NEWS AGRICULTURE

Ferrini Ranch developer, Ag Land Trust reach conservation deal

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The area known as Lupine Meadow on Ferrini Ranch off of Highway 68 in 2014. (Vern Fisher – Monterey Herald file)

By **JIM JOHNSON** | jjohnson@montereyherald.com | Monterey Herald

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Ferrini Ranch will not be developed after all courtesy of a \$10 million agricultural easement agreement reached between Southern California developer Mark Kelton and the Ag Land Trust.

Last week, the state Department of Conservation's Strategic Growth Council approved \$10,025,000 in sustainable agricultural lands conservation program grant funding for the Ag Land Trust's purchase of conservation easements for most of the 870-acre property straddling Toro County Park along

Monterey- Salinas Highway between River Road and San Benancio Road.

Envisioned decades ago as a 900-lot partner to the Toro Park Estates subdivision across the designated “scenic” highway, the Ferrini Ranch project finally secured approval from a split Board of Supervisors in 2014 for a 185-lot development including 168 market-rate homes and 17 moderate-income “workforce” units, along with preservation of more than 700 acres in permanent open space.

The project and its environmental impact report were challenged in court by the Highway 68 Coalition and Landwatch but prevailed at both the local and state appellate court level.

Instead of homes on the site, 850 acres of the \$18.5 million property will be subject to the conservation easement and available for its historic ranching and farming uses. The remaining 20 acres include an existing home on five acres near San Benancio Road and 15 acres designated for the development of three homes.

In a statement, developer Mark Kelton and partner Ray Harrod Jr. credited Ag Land Trust CEO Sherwood Darington and board chairman Richard Nutter, as well as Ag Land Trust founder and former Supervisor Lou Calcagno for spearheading the deal.

“They found a reasonable and mutually acceptable approach that all parties could consider and pursue,” Kelton said, noting that Calcagno promoted a cooperative approach and Darington spent years on “persistent effort” to reach an agreement. “Knowing the need for housing in Monterey County and with planned improvements to infrastructure for the area, we are still somewhat disappointed not to be building the community that had been envisioned and carefully planned. At the same time, we are proud to have worked with the Ag Land Trust and the Department of Conservation on this opportunity for long- term stewardship of the property.”

The state grant funding comes from cap-and-trade revenue and was part of nearly \$57 million awarded statewide for “agricultural land use planning and land conservation to promote infill development and keep the state’s valuable farm and ranch lands available for agricultural production” according to the state Department of Conservation website.

Formed in 1984, the Ag Land Trust has completed more than 100 conservation easements covering more than 45,000 acres, mostly in Monterey County.

Jim Johnson

Jim Johnson covers Monterey County government and water issues for the Monterey Herald.