

Supervisor seeks federal help to buy Rancho Guejito

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VALLEY CENTER -- County Supervisor Bill Horn and environmentalist Dan Silver returned last week from a lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., reasonably confident they can wrangle money out of the federal government to help buy a historic spread east of Escondido, Silver said.

Silver and Horn flew to the nation's capital last week to lobby federal legislators for money to buy and preserve 23,000-acre Rancho Guejito -- the last intact Mexican land grant in California and the largest piece of privately owned, undeveloped land in the county.

Even if the federal government earmarks funds for the purchase, the property owner has said repeatedly through her representative that Guejito, a working cattle ranch, isn't for sale at any price.

Horn declined comment Monday through his spokesman, John Culea, who said the supervisor would no longer speak with the North County Times because he believes the newspaper's coverage is biased against him.

In previous interviews, Horn has said he hopes to raise \$100 million from the federal government, \$50 million from the state and \$35 million from the county to help acquire the ranch.

Silver and Horn met over two days last week with key legislators to talk about the best way to secure funding to purchase the property. Silver said Guejito was an easy sell.

"Guejito is a compelling story," said Silver, leader of the nonprofit Endangered Habitats League. "We educated a lot of folks about the importance of preserving such a unique property and we got a lot of enthusiastic support."

The next step is finding a way to negotiate with the owners, Silver said.

"I'm convinced all we need is a willing seller," he said. "Based on the Washington support, I believe the resources can be made available."

Hank Rupp, a Temecula-based attorney who represents the owner of the ranch, has called Horn's offers to buy the land "outrageous," saying Guejito isn't for sale.

Rupp has said he believes Horn could try to take the ranch through eminent domain, a controversial power that allows the government to take private property for public use and pay the property owner based upon a legal judgement of fair market value.

Horn has said he doesn't consider eminent domain to be an option for acquiring the nearly pristine ranch.

The ranch hasn't been appraised to determine a fair price because it's not on the market, Rupp said last week.

Meanwhile, many people familiar with Guejito have said they believe the owner is preparing to sell the ranch to developers.

Often called the "conservation jewel of San Diego County," the working cattle ranch stretches from the San Pasqual Valley north to the 4,221-foot peak of Pine Mountain near the La Jolla Indian Reservation. Historians have hailed the rugged expanse as a "time capsule from the 1800s."

Benjamin Coates, a wealthy businessman, bought the property in 1974 for \$10 million. Since his death in 2004, his daughter, Theodate, a New York artist Rupp represents, has been managing the estate.

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