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## Leading environmental groups support county plans for 20,000-acre wild lands, affirm differences over details.

A land transfer of more than 20,000 acres from the Irvine Company's vast holdings to OC Parks not only puts more ground under county control, it lays the groundwork for a new era of cooperation and mutual purpose between county government, environmental advocates and private organizations.

Park advocates, often at odds with county government over land use and management issues, have worked closely with OC Parks staff to ensure the natural lands destined for county ownership are adequately protected and funded, and that their conservation value is upheld.

Poised for approval by the Board of Supervisors June 29<sup>th</sup>, the land transfer represents the largest single conveyance of property from private hands to public ownership in county history. While the 20,000 acres will fall under the auspices of OC Parks, it will not be the same wilderness or regional "park land" the public is used to. These lands come with a higher standard for stewardship that allows for public access through docent-led tours, while land managers monitor the health and well-being of habitat and wildlife.

In exchange for the right to develop other lands and to receive sizable tax benefits, The Irvine Company permanently protected roughly 8,500 acres in the early 1990s and announced the permanent preservation of another 11,550 acres in 2001. CEO Donald Bren set the bar for how these important natural lands and globally significant resources would be managed and conserved. The County of Orange has embraced this conservation ethic.

The expanse of natural open space is among the last of north Orange County's remaining wild lands, home to native plants and animals. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) was hired by The Irvine Company to manage these sensitive ecosystems in 1990; in 2001 the company donated 11,500 acres of conservations easements to TNC. The Irvine Ranch Conservancy, a private foundation funded by Bren to develop docent led programs allowing public access took over land management responsibilities in 2007.

To ensure the habitats, ecosystems and scenic vistas remain in a natural state, Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks (FHBP) spearheaded a task force to work closely with the county as it hammered out the details of the transfer. The Environmental Coalition Land Transfer Steering Committee includes representatives from the Audubon Starr Ranch, Audubon Sea and Sage, Hills for Everyone, Laguna Greenbelt, the Sierra Club and FHBP.

Collectively, these groups represent over 200 years of conservation strategy, land acquisition and management experience. The steering committee carefully reviewed the details of the proposed land transfer and actively met with all involved parties. This included representatives from The Irvine Company, OC Parks, The Nature Conservancy, the Nature Reserve of Orange County, the Irvine Ranch Conservancy and the Orange County Board of Supervisors.

“The OC Parks staff has listened to our concerns and accepted many of our ideas,” says FHBP President Jean Watt. “This process has been unique in that we all had the same goal, but differing ideas of how to get there. In the end, we agreed to disagree on a few details, but will continue to work together to protect the land and explain the need for limited access restrictions to the public.”

The Nature Conservancy will continue its oversight of the 11,500 acres; the Irvine Ranch Conservancy will also remain land stewards and offer programs for public access. Biology and environmental data will be studied and analyzed by researchers at the University of California, Irvine. OC Parks will assign four rangers to watch over the lands.

The Steering Committee remains focused on four objectives: ensuring the land retains it legally binding conservation protections that maintain a healthy functioning ecosystem; advocating for funding; designing a state-of-the art Resource Management Plan; and creating an independent oversight committee to help steward this remarkable landscape.

“The county has assured us that these elements are or will be in place,” Watt says. “Because we want the land transfer to succeed, we are accepting the county’s assurances in a leap of faith. For now.”

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Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks is a countywide non-profit organization focused on protecting the natural lands, waterways and beaches of Orange County. Learn more at [www.FHBP.org](http://www.FHBP.org).