

Los Angeles Times | OPINION

Park land and prudence

TALK WAS several years ago that Irvine Co. Chairman Donald Bren, having made his billions as a developer of anonymous-looking suburban sprawl, was interested in creating a lasting legacy as well. And what a legacy it is. A single real estate transfer proposed by his company would expand the Orange County park system by more than half, potentially opening 20,000 rolling acres to public access.

The land includes uniquely scenic and historic sites, such as a spectacular sandstone ravine called the Sinks or "Little Grand Canyon," the red-rock cliffs of Black Star Canyon and Hangman's Tree, a creek-side sycamore from which members of the infamous Juan Flores gang were lynched in 1857.

The Irvine Co. set aside about 9,000 acres of the land as mitigation for development; then, in 2001, Bren announced that an additional 11,000 acres would become permanent open space, overseen by a nonprofit conservancy and turned over within about 10 years to public agencies. For the last couple of years, the Irvine Ranch Conservancy has managed the land. Its outstanding stewardship included restoration work and limited public entry through docent-led hikes.

Open access to these areas would be a historic gift. But it also is important for this transfer to evolve successfully, both to preserve the land and to protect taxpayer money. The transfer is speeding through the approval process. Before anything is finalized, the Irvine Co. and the county should give the public more information and time to air questions and concerns.

Shedding ownership of the land would be a boon to the Irvine Co. as well as a potential windfall to the public. The developer has been liable for any mishaps on the land and contracted with the conservancy at \$1.5 million a year; for at least the next three years, the county rather than the Irvine Co. would pay the conservancy to do the same work. It is unclear precisely what would happen after that.

The county also should provide specific information about its ability to take financial responsibility for 50% more park land. Because the 20,000 acres can never be developed no matter who owns it, its main value as a public asset is the extent to which the public can use it for recreation. The county should have detailed plans for that to happen before accepting the land.

The proposed transfer is the product of vision and noble intentions. By slowing the process to a deliberative pace that entails more public involvement, the county can best ensure that those intentions are translated into a rich and permanent heritage.