

Trust secures 80 acres for agriculture

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The Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust (BALT) completed the acquisition of an agricultural conservation easement on 80 acres of the Hannah Nicole Vineyards property last week.

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The Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust (BALT) has secured 80 acres along the Hannah Nicole Vineyards in Brentwood as an agricultural conservation easement, a move intended to preserve the property for future farming use in perpetuity.

"The first reason for doing this is that it conserves agriculture, and we're very passionate about that," said Hannah Nicole owner Neil Cohn. "We couldn't subdivide it anyway, because it's zoned as Ag land in the county general plan ... the goal was to find a way to balance conserving the land for future Ag use and still develop it the way we wanted to, and that's what we've done."

Kathryn Lyddan, the executive director of BALT, said the acquisition of the Cohns' 80 acres was finalized last week, and stands as a significant accomplishment.

"It's very exciting," said Lyddan. "This is the fourth one (acquisition) we have done in four years and it's a hugely complicated effort. We are delighted to have been able to be a part of making it happen."

An agricultural conservation easement is a document recorded against a property that guarantees the land can be used only for agricultural purposes. The easement remains in effect forever, even if the land changes ownership. In return, the current landowner is compensated for

giving something up; in this case, the Cohns gave up the right to subdivide and develop the property.

By agreeing to the agricultural conservation easement, the Cohns will receive \$688,000 – the appraised value of the easement – and the rights to 10 acres of the original 80, which they plan to use for the construction of a wine tasting room and event center.

“This will help us pay for a portion of the winery,” said Cohn. “It helps to overcome some of the financial hurdles and it’s good to conserve the land and keep it agricultural. What we don’t want are our beautiful vineyards to become single-family homes.”

The acquisition is a feather in the cap for the beleaguered BALT, which lost its administrative funding – roughly \$180,000 a year – from the city of Brentwood in June. Funding for the physical preservation of land, however, continues to come from the city via developer mitigation fees earmarked for agricultural conservation easements, and are distributed project by project through an agricultural subcommittee. To date, approximately \$8 million remains in the fund, according to Councilman Bob Brockman.

“Three years ago I attended a few meetings and I threw up my hands in frustration and said enough is enough,” said Brockman, who represents the city’s interest in BALT. “We felt that BALT was trying to do what people didn’t want. People don’t want to give up their land; they want to hold onto their land.

“It took a little push, but BALT is now very much in the game and they are becoming self-sufficient. I’m tickled pink that we are bringing in viable agricultural conservation. I’m a property rights guy. I don’t believe in telling people that they can or can’t do something with their land.”

Lyddan said that the loss of funding from Brentwood was a blow to the organization, but she remains upbeat that the group will continue to flourish and grow.

“It was a rather abrupt and shocking loss of funding,” said Lyddan, who said that the group has since been surviving on grants from the county and private foundations. “But the nice thing is that since then, we have been successfully working with the city on a project-by-project basis, and while we have been having a very difficult time, we remain committed to the mission – and we have a fantastic amount of work to be done.”

Other easement deals in the works include a 93-acre conservation project on the Frog Hollow Farms property, located on Highway 4 near Union Cemetery. For more information on agricultural easements, visit the BALT Web site at www.brentwoodaglandtrust.org or call 634-6738.