

Irvine Co. gives 20,000 acres of open space to Orange County

The gift from Irvine Ranch developer Donald Bren, 78, completes the transfer of 50,000 acres into public hands for parks, greenways, and a recreational and wilderness preserve.

Scott Kraft, Los Angeles Times, 6-30-10

A rugged, 20,000-acre parcel of the original Irvine Ranch — a pristine landscape of steep canyons, native grassland and sycamore woodland that is home to golden eagles, mountain lions and dozens of rare and endangered species of plants and animals — became public property Tuesday in a historic deal with the developer who has sculpted the look of modern suburbia in Southern California.

The open-space land, a gift from Donald Bren and the Irvine Co., was unanimously accepted by the Orange County Board of Supervisors, which also approved a long-term plan to manage the natural habitat, designated a National Natural Landmark four years ago. In one swoop, the size of parkland owned by the county grew by more than half.

The transfer of a large part of the historic ranch was an important milestone, placing the last major chunk of open private land in public hands and signaling the end of an era of enormous growth for Orange County.

It also was the culmination of an effort that Bren, a 78-year-old multibillionaire, launched more than three decades ago when he took control of the 94,000-acre Irvine Ranch, about a fifth of Orange County.

"It's been a long trail, these last 30 years, and this is a very significant event for us," Bren said in a rare interview after the handover.

He called the private-public partnership on open spaces a rare example of "social entrepreneurship," adding that "I'm proud of the people in the company who spent so much time with these community partnerships. I couldn't be more pleased. This is an investment in the future. It lives forever, and that is in fact a legacy."

Over the years, Bren's vision as a developer has transformed the Orange County landscape. His Irvine Co. created a retail, commercial and suburban juggernaut on 44,000 acres of the ranch, from the Newport coast to the city of Irvine, becoming, in the process, one of the world's largest and most-copied developers of planned communities.

But he also set aside 50,000 acres for parks, greenways, and a recreational and wilderness preserve. More than half of that was previously donated to the public; the land given to the county Tuesday completes the transfer.

"I can't even begin to guess what the value of this property is. But in terms of its biological and geologic value, it is truly priceless," said Michael O'Connell, executive director of the Irvine Ranch Conservancy. "It's a world-class piece of land."

The conservancy, a nonprofit entity created by the Donald Bren Foundation, will continue to manage the land, under contract to the county's parks department.

The new county wilderness area extends from near the 91 Freeway south to the hills above Irvine, and parts of it

are visible from both sides of the 241 toll road in eastern Orange County. It includes Loma Ridge, Laguna Laurel and Limestone Canyon, and plans are under way to create a new, 2,000-acre nature park, Black Star Canyon Regional Park, adjacent to the Cleveland National Forest.

Nearly five times the size of Griffith Park, the land is essentially one large tract, which makes it important ecologically. It is part of what scientists call a Mediterranean climate zone, an area characterized by dry, mild weather and coastal fog that covers just 2% of the planet but contains 20% of all known plant species.

The land is a "truly magnificent, a globally important 'hotspot' of biological diversity," said Albert Bennett, dean of the School of Biological Sciences at UC Irvine. He said students and faculty travel the world to study similarly endowed open spaces "and these local lands rival many of those places in their diversity and biological importance."

Scientists also regard the tract as a geological treasure, and parts of it preserve an intact record of the last 80 million years of Earth history.

The parkland is rare among similarly sized natural habitats in the United States because it is so close to a highly urbanized area — the land is within a half-hour drive of nearly 3 million people.

Much of the parkland is remote and untouched, though part of it has been accessible to the public in the past, mostly through naturalist-led hikes and recreation days when visitors can go mountain biking and horseback riding. But access to the sensitive habitat is limited, and the county says that is likely to continue as the county develops long-term preservation plans.

"We want to create as many opportunities as possible for people to connect to the land and care about it," O'Connell said. "But not so much that they love it too much and threaten the values that make it so special."

When the Irvine Co. announced the wilderness gift last year, some environmentalists raised questions about whether the county had the financial resources to protect it.

The funding plan presented Tuesday by Mark Denny, director of Orange County Parks, includes \$4 million from the Irvine Co. for management and capital improvements as well as a \$1-million endowment for a scientific research center at UC Irvine. In addition, the Nature Conservancy is contributing \$2 million.

Environmentalists welcomed the plan Tuesday. Penny Elia, of the Sierra Club told the supervisors that it marked a "historic day." Jean Watt, president of Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting natural habitats, said the gift "lays the groundwork for a new era of cooperation" among the county, environmental advocates and private organizations.

The donation was the largest single transfer of private property to public ownership in Orange County history, increasing the county's parks and open-space protected land from 39,000 acres to more than 59,000 acres.

The Irvine Ranch got its name from its original owner, James Irvine, an Irish immigrant who started a produce and grocery business in San Francisco during the Gold Rush and, with his partners, assembled the ranch from Spanish and Mexican land grants. His son, James Jr., inherited the ranch in 1892 and launched one of the state's earliest large-scale agricultural enterprises.

In 1897, the Irvine Co. made its first public land donation: 304 acres near the city of Orange that is today known as Irvine Regional Park.

Bren, one of the last California land barons, took over the company with two partners in 1977 and, two years later, they sold a discounted tract of land to the state to create Crystal Cove State Park.

After Bren bought out his partners, he began a more aggressive move to develop the ranch and, at the same time, began a process of large-scale land preservation aimed at creating wildlife corridors and protecting the natural habitat.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Bren frequently took advantage of California's open spaces, hiking and camping in the mountains. As an outdoorsman, he said, "I really appreciated nature."

His family had a beach home in Orange County, and since he moved there 50 years ago, he said, "I've seen Orange County grow and I've grown with it. And one of the great opportunities was to be part of this open-space preservation partnership with the ranch. I think it's really the monumental legacy for this company."