

FACT SHEET: JOHNSTON RANCH PROPERTY INTEREST PURCHASE

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) proposes to purchase an approximate undivided 59% interest in the 868-acre Johnston Ranch property, located in the vicinity of the City of Half Moon Bay. Following the purchase, the District proposes to complete a land division resulting in 644 acres of the Uplands portion of the property to be owned in fee by the District. The proposed transaction would preserve coastal open space, protect and sustain grazing and agricultural lands, protect the Arroyo Leon Creek watershed for salmonid habitat, and improve future public access to surrounding District lands. It would also create opportunities to provide compatible local and regional trail use in collaboration with the City of Half Moon Bay (HMB, City) and California State Parks.

Background: In the 1990's, Johnston Ranch was purchased from developers by the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), an independent non-profit land trust, in response to wide-ranging concerns about the accelerating loss of agricultural lands and open space in San Mateo County. Since then, POST's intent has been to transfer much of the property to a public agency that can provide permanent protection of the upland areas while allowing public access. POST envisions the remaining cultivated crop land to remain in agriculture and be repurchased by a local farmer, subject to a conservation easement.

In 2014, after extensive public engagement, the District's Board of Directors adopted a Vision Plan to guide ongoing efforts in protecting scenic open spaces of regional value, preserve natural and cultural resources, support local agriculture, and provide additional opportunities for the public to experience nature. The Vision Plan identifies the preservation of open space in the uplands east of HMB, such as the Johnston Ranch, as one of the priority projects for achieving these goals.

Consistent with one of the key goals of the Vision Plan of providing public access to open spaces, the District approached HMB and entered into a partnership agreement with HMB and POST in 2019 to pursue local and regional trail connection opportunities. These opportunities include a trail connection from downtown HMB to the City's Johnston House property and further out to Burleigh H. Murray Ranch State Park and Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve. Under the agreement, the District and City would collaborate on a future shared parking and trailhead at the Johnston House property and related trail planning in the uplands area south of Higgins Canyon Road. The agreement also states an intent to protect and support farming and ranching uses on the Johnston Ranch property. The agreement confirms the District's commitment to support local agriculture and facilitates future public access to the Johnston Ranch uplands area.

Location (see Attachment 1): The 868-acre Johnston Ranch property is located at the southern urban/rural boundary of HMB, east of Highway 1 and is accessible from Higgins Canyon Road. The property is in unincorporated San Mateo County, southwest of the District's 1,715.63-acre Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve (Preserve).

Funding: The District's Board of Directors will consider the purchase of the property interest,

including price and terms, in the fall of 2021. Purchase of the property supports the District's overall coastal mission and Vision Plan Portfolio #1 *Miramontes Ridge: Gateway to the Coast Public Access, Stream Restoration and Agricultural Enhancements*. The purchase is eligible for Measure AA funding.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Landscape: The Johnston Ranch property is bisected by Higgins Canyon Road and borders Highway 1 to the west. The lowland portions consist of irrigated row crops and dry farmed fields. The uplands above the farm fields are vegetated with coastal grassland and brush, and the terrain consists of rolling hills and a steep bluff on the south side of Arroyo Leon. The property rises from an elevation of approximately 100 feet along Arroyo Leon to 400 feet south of Higgins Canyon Road and to 700 feet in the hills north of the road. The hillsides offer panoramic views of the San Mateo coast, HMB, and the Santa Cruz Mountains to the east and south. The property borders the City's historic Johnston House property to the west, south and east.

Land Use (see Attachment 2): The 644-acre uplands area of the property consists of 416 acres north of Higgins Canyon Road, and 228 acres south of the road. The uplands to the north have a developed spring, two livestock ponds, water tanks, and approximately 311 acres of grasslands that have been grazed by a local rancher for many years. A rocked driveway provides access to a ranch yard from Higgins Canyon Road. The ranch yard contains a 3,600 square foot hay storage barn, corrals, and small storage structures. This area would continue to be grazed under a conservation grazing lease and rangeland management plan under the proposed District partial interest purchase. The uplands to the south consist of fallow coastal scrub and grasslands with no livestock fencing or water infrastructure and includes the densely wooded riparian channel of Arroyo Leon. This area is accessed from Higgins Canyon Road via an existing dirt road through the City's Johnston House property. Due to a lack of infrastructure and access constraints, reintroduction of grazing is not proposed for this area of the property at this time. However, the District can consider a viable and compatible grazing proposal from interested parties in the future. The westerly 224-acres of irrigated crop lands on both sides of Higgins Canyon Road have been farmed continuously by the Giusti family since the late 1940s. Most of the farm area is fenced and includes two reservoirs south of the City's Johnston House property and a smaller reservoir to the east. The southwest portion of the property is dry farmed. The 224-acre area would continue to be farmed under POST's retained ownership interest, and available for future sale to a farmer subject to an agricultural conservation easement.

Flora and Fauna: The upland portions of Johnston Ranch contain coastal chaparral and grasslands, bisected by a dense canopy of riparian vegetation. The diverse vegetation provides habitat for wildlife, including deer, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats and a wide variety of smaller mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. A wide variety of birds frequent this landscape, including raptors, songbirds, and other land-based avian species. Potential habitat exists for federally-threatened California red-legged frog and special status Western pond turtle.

Water Resources: The property possesses significant watershed and riparian resources important in the support of animal species and agricultural operations. These include approximately 1.2 miles of Arroyo Leon, a perennial stream and tributary to Pilarcitos Creek that provides potential spawning and rearing habitat for steelhead trout, numerous wooded drainages, two ponds on the

uplands area used for livestock watering, and three reservoirs serving the farm area.

Coastal Service Plan Compliance: The property is within the boundaries of the District’s Service Plan for the San Mateo County Coastal Annexation Area (Service Plan), adopted in June 2003. The mission of the Service Plan is *“To acquire and preserve in perpetuity open space land and agricultural land of regional significance, protect and restore the natural environment, preserve rural character, encourage viable agricultural use of land resources, and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.”* The purchase of the property complies with and furthers the mission of the Service Plan.

Terms and Conditions: The proposed purchase price for an approximate undivided 59% interest in the 868-acre property is \$4,800,000. The 59% ownership interest in the property reflects the lower per acre value of the uplands area versus the higher per acre value of the cultivated agricultural area of the property. The purchase price is based upon the value of the 644-acre uplands area that would be fully transferred in fee title to the District after a land division is complete. POST would retain the remaining undivided 41% interest. The District and POST would subsequently apply for a land division application with San Mateo County to create a 644-acre Johnston Ranch uplands parcel to be owned solely by the District and a 224-acre farm parcel to be solely owned in fee title by POST for future sale to a farmer. The partial interest purchase would allow the District to begin managing the land, planning for future public access, conducting further resource assessments, and pursuing infrastructure improvements on the uplands area of the property during the County land division process, which could take several years. As part of this transaction, the District and POST would enter into a tenancy-in-common agreement establishing exclusive use and management of the 644-acre uplands by the District and the 224-acre farm area by POST. In addition, POST would assign a five-year grazing lease with a local rancher (with a five-year option to renew) for the 311-acres of grasslands area north of Higgins Canyon Road to the District.

NEXT STEPS

Environmental Review: Environmental review in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is underway for the proposed purchase.

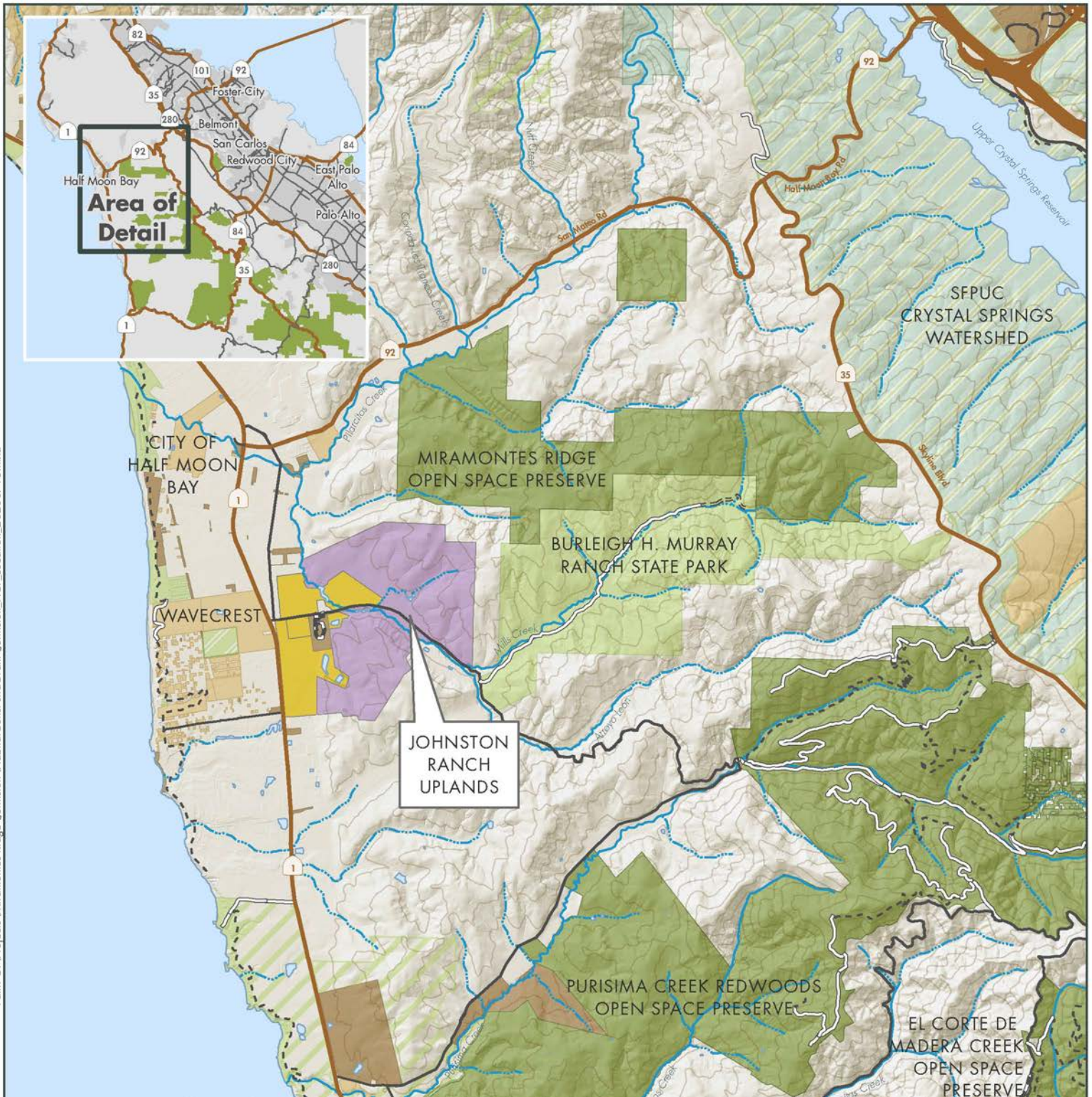
Board Action: The District’s Board of Directors will consider the purchase of the 59% undivided interest in the Johnston Ranch property as an addition to the Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve at a public meeting in the fall of 2021. Included for consideration at that time will be the property’s Preliminary Use and Management Plan, which is expected to propose a status quo management approach of the uplands area. The District would manage the uplands area as a closed area pending further planning as described below.

Planning: If purchased, a land division plan allowing the District to secure sole interest in the uplands area would be submitted to the County and be subject to public review and comment. Subsequent planning for any future public access (trails) would include consultation with private property owners on Higgins Canyon Road, HMB, and appropriate agencies and organizations. Outreach would include public meetings to gather input and to review draft and final plans. Further environmental review would be prepared to assess and mitigate potential impacts as a result of any plans that are proposed.

Public Participation: Interested parties are encouraged to contact Ariel Starr, Real Property/Natural

Resources Administrative Assistant at the District office (650) 691-1200, extension 567, or at astarr@openspace.org, to request that their names be added to the public notification list for this proposed property purchase.

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Location Map - Johnston Ranch Property Interest Acquisition

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|  Portion of Johnston Ranch to be managed by POST |  Other Protected Lands |  Land Trust |
|  Portion of Johnston Ranch to be managed by MROSD |  Private Property |  Other Public Agency |
|  MROSD Preserves |  Watershed Land | |

Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District
(MROSD)
July 2021



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While the District strives to use the best available digital data, these data do not represent a legal survey and are merely a graphic illustration of geographic features.