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## Outcry grows as downed trees keep Orinda Nature Area shuttered



Volunteers with Toris Jaeger at council meeting. Photo Sora O'Doherty

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Glimme later spoke to the Lamorinda Weekly, and gave this reporter a tour of the area after she had consulted with an arborist concerning the safety and fate of the trees on the 18-acre parcel that is owned the OUSD. A rough estimate of the cost of making the entire area safe stands at a quarter- to a half-million dollars. However, the district is hoping to proceed by addressing one area at a time, starting with reopening the garden area where volunteers used to convene each Sunday to work on raising plants both for food and for replacing plants in the nature area. This area is fenced off, so by trimming the trees to remove dead branches it can be made safe for occupation.

Last week Glimme conveyed to the Friends of the Nature Area that the estimate for making the garden portion of the property safe for volunteers as well as the Wagner Ranch Elementary School Garden, which provides access to the Nature Area, was \$27,500. Although it is uncertain whether there will be any funds available in the OUSD

budget, the Friends have decided to commence a fundraising effort in conjunction with the Wagner Ranch Elementary School Garden Advocates.

The Wagner Ranch Garden, which has also been closed since the last storms, is especially critical for the Special Education children, according to Gina Gabriel, one of the parent advocates. One child with a severe disability has been pointing at the garden area every time he is nearby, so the Wagner Ranch Garden parent advocates are eager to have the school garden reopened.

The next area could be the kitchen area, however it is not fenced off from the remainder of the nature area, so that might present a difficulty.

Theodore Wagner was a surveyor general for the state of California. Wagner bought 241 acres in Orinda in the 1880s and built first a small ranch, then an elegant two-story mansion that was the center of Orinda social life at the turn of the century. The property included a forge, a dairy barn, a brick kiln, a car-bide gas plant and a winery, but the family lost most of its

assets in different business ventures, capped by the failure of the California Nevada railroad and a fire that destroyed the main house.

Most of the property became part of the holdings of the East Bay Water Company, now the East Bay Municipal Water District, except for a portion given to Orinda for a school, now the site of Wagner Ranch Elementary. Today EBMUD owns the creek and the land beside the creek, including approximately 20 feet on the Nature Area side of the creek. There was a path alongside the creek that was used by the children during their educational activities in the Nature Area. That path was so damaged by the winter storms that it is no longer considered safe for the children, and a spokesperson for EBMUD states it has no interest in restoring the trail.

According to Toris Jaeger, Naturalist at the Orinda Nature Area, during their time, the Wagners planted a number of non-native trees on the property, including eucalyptus, Monterey pines, cedar trees, and a specimen linden tree. The property is covered with many types of oak trees, including, a black oak, a garry oak, one or two tan oaks, one canyon oak, and many valley oaks and California live oaks. Some of the oak trees on the property are as much as 400 years old. Oak trees range in life span from 300 to 600 years, depending on species. There are also some redwoods on the property; redwoods can live for up to 1,500 years.

Since its inception, the Nature Area has offered hands-on experiential education to approximately 1,000 Orinda school children annually. Until the closure of the Nature Area, the OUSD had

been planning on expanding the educational opportunities to other schools. The Nature Area comprises 18 acres of meadow, forest, ponds and streams and is a certified Schoolyard Habitat (#1568) by the National Wildlife Federation. San Pablo Creek, which is home to thousands of native plant and animal species, borders one side of the preserve. Since 1970, the programs of the Nature Area have helped students embrace the connection between themselves and their environment and develop a sense of lifelong stewardship.

The Friends of the Orinda

Nature Area is a grass roots nonprofit organization formed in 2005 to prevent construction of a maintenance yard on site of the Nature Area. The Friends again stepped up in 2009 to fund education programs when the Orinda Union School District was unable to continue its support for the Nature Area due to funding limitations. Since then, The Friends have received substantial donations from the community for the naturalist, nature aides, and materials needed to conduct environmental education. For information, visit [www.fwrna.org](http://www.fwrna.org)

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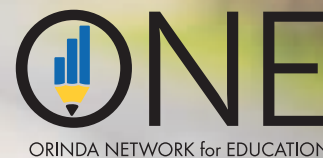


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