

Grey Whale Ranch public-use agreement still being argued

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SANTA CRUZ - When the owners of the Grey Whale Ranch began actively evicting trespassers earlier this year, county parks officials began working on a plan to allow public use of the ranch's scenic trails.

But after two months of on-and-off negotiations, the county and ranch owner Ron Yanke remain far apart on an agreement that would allow public access to the ranch, an undeveloped 2,400-acre timber property near UC Santa Cruz.

County officials have pinned their hopes on an open space easement signed in 1972 by representatives of the Cowell Foundation, a former owner of the ranch. The 20-year easement allows public use of trails on the ranch provided that the county build, maintain and police the trails, and that the county provide liability and property-damage insurance.

For 18 years there was little interest in the Grey Whale Ranch, and county officials never pursued their rights under the open space easement.

But now that public interest in using the ranch has been piqued, county supervisors have asked parks director Benton Angove to draw up a trail map of the property and a contract agreeable to both the county and Yanke. If an agreement is signed, hikers, bikers and equestrians will be able to use trails on the property, which lies between UC Santa Cruz's nature reserve and Wilder Ranch State Park.

Over the past few weeks Angove has prepared a preliminary trail map and a preliminary contract, and has met with

the owner's representative several times, most recently on May 7.

Neither Angove or the county counsel's office have responded to requests for information since the May 7 meeting. But Yanke's local representative, John Steinbacher, says the county's proposal is poorly studied, ignores important problems and is financially unrealistic. Unless the county improves its offer considerably, chances are slim that an agreement on public use can be reached before the easement expires in February 1992, he said.

The biggest problem with the county's proposal is that it assumes the entire ranch is covered by the open space easement, Steinbacher said. The easement covers only four of the 15 parcels encompassed by the ranch, and those four parcels are not adjacent to one another, he said.

In a May 3 interview, Angove agreed that the open space easement covered only a limited area, but said the county would ask for permission to extend public use to the rest of the ranch, too.

"We would like to extend public rights well into the future," he said.

But Yanke is not willing to offer many concessions to the county, particularly since the county sued him over a proposed timber harvest last year. The court case is still pending.

"We are willing to meet our obligation under the open space agreement," Steinbacher said. "But the owner has no interest in allowing entry into areas not covered by the agreement. Why would we enter into a new open space agreement ... when the old one was used against us to deny access to our commercial timber?"

In addition, county staff has never actually visited the trails listed on its trail map, Steinbacher said. The trail map was drawn by "a committee of users," according to a letter Angove submitted to county supervisors. Steinbacher calls the 16 miles of trails identified on the map "a fantasy."

"It makes no sense at all," he said. "No one from parks has ever been out there, they don't know the land. Some of those slopes are 45 degrees, and they say there are trails where there are none. Let's be realistic. This stuff is silly."

Steinbacher also wants to know where visitors will park, and whether the county will complete an environmental study on the proposal.

A report submitted to county supervisors on March 6 estimates patrol of the trails and property would cost \$300 per month, and that trash and toilet services would cost \$175 per month. Trail maintenance would be done exclusively by volunteers, the report said.

In reply, Yanke's attorney Steven Worthley sent the supervisors a letter saying the cost estimates are "grossly deficient."

"It does not even remotely approach the current costs now incurred for similar responsibilities on the Pogonip property... (where) the city is currently spending \$150 per acre for trail patrol and maintenance alone," Worthley wrote.

Parks officials have tentatively agreed to meet with Steinbacher again next week, he said.

"We need some answers to proceed," he said. "Let's not just burn up the clock."