

MVSC White Sulphur
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White Sulphur Springs Ranch sits prominently in the Mohawk Valley, a reminder of a gentle past, but also of the not-so-gentle effects of neglect. Photos of the ranch house in the late 1990s and today document a rapid decay.

Just as the place seemed destined for ashes and dust, a group of visionary and dedicated community members came along to raise it up again.

Last year, the non-profit Mohawk Valley Stewardship Council formed, aimed at protecting, conserving and restoring "the region's physical, cultural, archeological, historical and living resources" and encouraging "public cooperation to improve, protect and maintain agricultural, economic and community sustainability in the region." Its primary focus is the acquisition and restoration of the ranch.

The council's board of directors includes president Alice Berg, Bill Tantau, Susan Pettinato, Ginny Liljefelt, Sally Tantau and Marnie Malpass. It's prime mover, Berg is a soft-spoken woman whose manner belies her knowledge and determination.

Berg said that she'd been living out of the area for 20 years and wasn't prepared for what she saw when she returned. "I didn't really know it (the house) was falling down," she said. "I came back and saw it and said 'Oh my God, this can't happen. We have to do something.'"

This was the first homestead in the area—originally a 400-acre ranch owned by three men, Gould, Friend and Jamison. The date of construction for the combined ranch house, stage-stop and residence, built by George McLear, is speculative, thought to be between 1857 and 1867. In building, McLear picked the "very best spot, with the best view, the most prominent spot . . . there are hot springs and a wealth of water here," said Berg. "It had a presence, when you entered the valley."

She noted that when people drive through the beautiful Mohawk Valley today on Highway 89, there are few places where they can stop and enjoy it, since almost all of it is private land.

She also has personal memories of White Sulphur Springs when it was a recreational center for the entire community. "Imagine as a kid, hanging out here in the summer, swimming," she said. "Every day we were here. This is where we hung out. Parents would bring picnics and they'd have blankets in the grass . . . and the kids would just swim all day."

Berg's experience in grant writing for the forest service and resource conservation districts led her to think big in the case of White Sulphur Springs Ranch. She found out that there was already a dedicated group of people circulating a petition to save the ranch, so she got involved and said, "OK, we've got to form a non-profit, and we need to start writing grants, and that's how we can save White Sulphur Springs."

She knew from the beginning that this was going to be a huge undertaking, and she approached it with the understanding that what was needed was "a substantial amount of money." Her thinking has paid off in a big way.

In the search for possible grants, Berg talked with Terry Benoit, a hydrologist with Feather River Coordinated Resource Management, who told her about a Caltrans grant, as he had received one for work on Sulphur Creek. (The ranch is within the Sulphur Creek subwatershed.)

When she heard about it, she thought, "White Sulphur Springs would be perfect" for this grant which is a mitigation grant for the effect of highway projects, "and this project happens to sit in the perfect location for that," she said.

Briefly, the grant is meant to be "compensation for the impacts that the highway had on the aesthetic (and) the scenic values of the valley, the water resources of the valley . . . if you read the Sulphur Creek watershed assessment, the highway is one of the major impacts in the Mohawk Valley. For Sulphur Creek and the hydrology of this watershed, the highway is a major disruption, so mitigation for it makes sense."

Berg framed the grant by focusing on these mitigation issues, she said. There were a number of highway projects nearby: highway widening, work at A15 (within sight of the property), work in Sulphur Creek and then down at Whitehawk Ranch. The proximity of these projects is what helped White Sulphur Springs qualify for the grant.

Further, the highway widening encroached on the ranch's parking area.

The Caltrans grant - for an astounding \$500,000 - came through this April. It is specifically for property acquisition. To get a grant of that size in this economic climate suddenly makes the stewardship council and its desire to save the ranch viable, not only in the community's eyes but, more importantly, in the eyes of other grant funders.

Most important of all, this funding, along with Berg's and the council's vision, has enabled a working relationship with the landowner, Steven Luczo, and his financial advisor, Jack May.

"The grant really gave us credibility with them," said Berg. Luczo is very philanthropically minded. In dealing with him for acquisition of the property, however, because he has such a substantial investment, "this had to be a business deal. They weren't going to just walk away from it."

The grant let Luczo and May know that the stewardship council "is serious," said Berg, "is a group (they) can deal with."

Berg said May has been exceedingly helpful, meeting with the group, tracking the grant and providing the "willing seller" agreement required for grant applications. "We needed a lot of stuff, and he stepped up to the plate and made sure that we had it."

Luczo has been watching the group's progress carefully. Now, because of this good working relationship, Berg said, "they are diligently working to make this happen together."

The terms of the Caltrans grant require that the money be used by June 2011, so the property acquisition will need to take place by that time.

An additional requirement of the grant, which is also a boon, is that the property must be preserved in perpetuity. That means it can never be subdivided and new houses can never be built on it. "The grant effectively seals the deal that this property will be preserved as it is, as a historic property," which Berg terms "a really positive thing for the valley."

With acquisition moving forward, the group can next turn its attention to restoration.

Berg's familiarity with resource management comes from a background that includes a B.S. in biology and an M.S. in natural resource management. She currently works as a consulting fisheries biologist, and she has extensive experience with stream and watershed restoration and environmental monitoring.

She combines this expertise with a strong sense of community and history. "What a great thing to be able to have a place for the entire community and tourists driving through to be able to stop and enjoy. It's not going to be just an isolated parcel somewhere. It sits right here on the (highway) 89, and everybody can use it."

In addition to the Caltrans grant, the stewardship council also received a \$500 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation specifically for "seed money" to begin a capital campaign to restore the historic main building at the ranch.

Berg has another grant in the works with the state parks for restoration of the main building. She was concerned that members of the public understand this bond money is set aside for projects like this one. It does not take away from

the needs of Plumas Eureka State Park, for example. "We're not in competition with Johnsville. We wouldn't want to be. This is a separate bond fund (that) the project happens to qualify for."

Berg and the council, not surprisingly given their clarity in other areas, have a very specific vision for the property. First, they want to restore the pool, possibly extending it to Olympic size, with a children's area or a separate children's pool.

Then, they want to landscape the grounds so that they're useable for picnics, weddings, reunions and school groups.

The amphitheater, with its signature stone fire pit, will be restored so that it can host musical and dramatic presentations along with environmental education events.

After that, they'll work on the "interpretive trails . . . that will interpret all the natural and cultural resources on this property." The land extends up and back through 38 acres, including a pond that might lure Thoreau, hot sulfur springs and, they believe (though they haven't verified it yet), Maidu cultural sites.

The trails, said Berg, "would wind back and provide the public access to forest service lands, because they're back there, but you can't get to them through all of this private property in the valley. This would be a trailhead here; they could walk or take mountain bikes through here."

According to Berg, Greg Williams, who owns Lost Sierra Bicycle Shop in Graeagle, "has plans for major trails that will connect with White Sulphur Springs from Portola and Calpine. There's a historic railroad grade back there, which would be perfect (for the trail) that goes all the way to Calpine and Carman Valley."

The second phase of the project will involve restoring the main building. "On the bottom floor," continued Berg, "we envision a real open conference site. But, we're going to maintain the original footprint of the building and maintain the character of the building."

It will be used for conferences, retreats, workshops and weddings, so there will be WiFi and a user-friendly commercial kitchen.

The second floor will house a museum that focuses on the natural history and culture of the Graeagle and Mohawk Valley areas, and will also provide environmental education.

The Portola Alumni Association has pledged its support for the museum project, and it is part of the state parks grant, as well.

Berg said the group also plans to have a geothermal education project. A secret that the old building holds is that it was one of the first homes in California to be heated via geothermal energy. The pipes are still under the house, said Berg, though they're not currently operational.

She has talked with Plumas Sierra Rural Electric Cooperative about retrofitting "the whole house so it's geothermally heated."

This will allow for another environmental education opportunity at White Sulphur Springs. Berg wants to "interpret that for the public to show them this sustainable energy source that we have." The house then becomes "low maintenance, low cost to heat, and the public can learn about geothermal energy" in the process.

Berg's love of White Sulphur Springs is what has fueled her work, but she also emphasizes the potential stimulus to the local economy that it will provide.

There are no plans to use any of the facilities for lodging because the limited space is needed for other things. So, when conferences and other events come to the ranch, local lodging will get a boost.

At the end of an impassioned discussion of White Sulphur Springs, Berg looks out over the valley. "Everyone seems to feel the peacefulness of the place," she said. "It has a very strong presence." Berg feels it as a living presence. "It wants to be restored," she said.

This Sunday, June 27, from 3:30 - 6:30 p.m., the second annual Save White Sulphur Springs fundraiser will take place at the Tantau Ranch, 2256 Highway 89 (at A-15) in Clio. Tickets are \$40 per person and are available in advance from Eco Centric and the Graeagle Outpost in Graeagle, as well as Kelly's Bookstore in Portola and the Plumas County Museum in Quincy.

Light food will be served along with some first-rate entertainment. Juni Fisher, a superb show woman as well as a multi award-winning traditional western singer/songwriter, will return for a second year. She'll be joined by Andy Nelson, cowboy poet and winner of the Skinny Roland Humor Award from the Academy of Western Artists. Rounding out the afternoon, local music favorites the BLT's will perform.

Superb live and silent auction items are listed on the council's Facebook page. Further information on White Sulphur Springs Ranch and the fundraiser can be found at mohawkvalley.us.

The stewardship council encourages the community to attend this event to show support for the rescue and restoration of White Sulphur Springs. For additional information call 836-2334.