

[back to article](#)

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Pitkin Marsh to be preserved, restored

Owner, conservationists reach deal for 27-acre site

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Wednesday, August 15, 2007 at 6:25 a.m.

Saving Pitkin Marsh, a 27-acre site on busy Highway 116 where some of Sonoma County's rarest plants thrive, will cost almost \$1-million under a financial deal approved Tuesday by Sonoma County supervisors.

Supervisors approved contributing \$400,000 from Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District funds in an arrangement that also requires that the Sonoma Land Trust seek \$570,000 from the state Wildlife Conservation Board of the California Department of Fish and Game.

An additional \$100,000 in Open Space District funds was approved by supervisors for spending on restoration in the marsh that sits in the Atascadero Creek watershed between Graton and Forestville.

Under the arrangement, the Sonoma Land Trust will eventually get title to the land and will be responsible for maintenance, restoration and developing public access.

West county supervisor Mike Reilly calls the Pitkin Marsh purchase "probably the most important natural resource acquisition that the district has done."

Reilly and other advocates of open space acquisition noted the site was on the path to being developed as a 29-bed inpatient health care facility when it encountered objections from neighbors and government agencies seeking environmental protections.

The marsh is home to a number of rare plant species, including the white sedge, which was believed extinct until discovered on the site in 1983. About 20 years ago, Pitkin Marsh was at the top of the county planning department's "Atlas of Natural Habitat," ahead of even the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Conservationists and neighbors said Tuesday they were grateful that property owner and chiropractor Alan Goldhamer was a cooperative and willing seller after his plans for a nutritional facility were not realized. Goldhamer said his company, Synergy PMC, had spent two years and about \$1.6 million in environmental studies in attempting to develop the site.

Previous landowners had used the site, which contains woodlands, grasslands and about 15 acres of wetlands, as a place for cattle and sheep to graze.

Appraisers for the Open Space District put the value of the property at \$970,000, according to a district associate planner, Marta Puente.

"The district wants to protect it, but not own it," Puente said.

Sonoma Land Trust conservation director Wendy Eliot said the nonprofit agency "would be cautious" about visitors on the property because of its ecological importance.

"As little as four months ago, this property was slated for institutional development," Eliot said. "It is a museumlike property."

Jon Sassin, whose property abuts the site and who organized the 70-member Friends of Pitkin Marsh, said he intends to negotiate a conservation easement on his land and he hopes others do the same in order to preserve the area.

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