

Bald Hill Saved from Development

by Ann Thomas

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Bald Hill, center, and Mount Tamalpais, to the left, rise above the Ross Valley, as seen from a public path climbing Red Hill. Photo by Gary Leo

Contrary to what many people believed, the summit and eastern face of Bald Hill have, until this past February, been in private hands and susceptible to development. The purchase by Marin Open Space Trust (MOST) capped more than four decades of efforts by many individuals and agencies to secure the 60-acre Ross Valley hilltop for permanent public protection.

The iconic 1,132-foot-high summit forms a backdrop to neighborhoods throughout the Corte Madera Creek watershed, being visible from the Corte Madera marshes to shopping malls in San Anselmo. It is located at the top of Upper Road West in Ross and includes two parcels that share a boundary with the Marin Municipal Water District watershed to the west and south. A popular hiking and recreational area, it is contiguous to more than 100,000 acres of other protected lands.

The mountain's lower slopes are heavily wooded, with variable topography; upper sections have chaparral and grasslands, and the summit affords panoramic views of the Bay and its cities. The steep slopes and creek drainages are vegetated with native redwood, oak, bay, buckeye, and madrone, and although there are no major waterways on site, seasonal and ephemeral streams on the slopes drain down to the valley's network of creeks.

The summit, which is now public land, has been in the ownership of an Asian investment firm since 1978, and during this time it has been zoned to permit construction of up to five estate homes, so development has been a constant possibility.

The property has been a high priority for acquisition as open space by Marin County and the Ross Valley community since 1976, when the San Anselmo General Plan contained the statement that "Bald Hill is so important to San Anselmo that the Town should attempt to enlist the support of the other cities of the County, the Water District and the County Open Space District so as to preserve this invaluable open space as a Ross Valley scenic resource." The hill was also identified in 1987 by the Town of Ross as a priority for acquisition, and in 1989 Ross and San Anselmo approved a joint powers agreement to raise funds to buy the site.

Purchase attempts stumbled for several decades. In 1990, San Anselmo and Ross placed a bond measure on the ballot to buy the summit parcel, but voter support fell 180 votes short of the two-thirds majority needed for passage. In 1993, Marin County offered \$1.4 million to purchase the property but the offer was declined. From 1993 to 2004 the late Ross Valley County Supervisor Hal Brown tried three times to open negotiations for purchase, and in 2008 MOST made its first offer to purchase the site. All the offers were rebuffed.

Then in 2020 the property was listed for sale and MOST quickly contacted the investment firm broker to try to hammer out an acquisition plan. Two years of multiple property appraisals, geotechnical surveys, price negotiations, title reports, and fundraising followed. In October 2022 the Marin County Supervisors agreed that the County would be the final owner if MOST could navigate the purchase. In November 2022 the Town of Ross authorized a financial contribution of \$200,000 toward the purchase, and San Anselmo supported a similar contribution. The final purchase and sale agreement was concluded in February, with simultaneous transfer of the land from MOST to the Marin County Open Space District.

MOST purchased the property in partnership with the towns of San Anselmo and Ross, San Anselmo Open Space Committee, the Tamalpais Conservation Club, and Marin County. The County's Parks and Open Space District has incorporated the property into the adjacent Marin County Bald Hill Open Space Preserve on the north side of Bald Hill, looking out over Fairfax and San Anselmo; the 46acre preserve also includes the Sky Ranch property which was purchased by MOST and added to the county preserve eight years ago. A celebration was held on June 10 at Natalie Coffin Greene Park to mark the successful conclusion of the long campaign to get the Bald Hill summit into public hands.

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