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VALLEY CENTER: Friends of Hellhole Canyon add 34 acres to preserve

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Friends of Hell Hole Canyon will have something new to celebrate in their annual meeting this Saturday following the acquisition of 34 acres for the preserve.

Rick Landavazo, president of Friends of Hellhole Canyon Open Space Preserve, said his volunteer group and the county worked together to buy the land, bringing the preserve east of Valley Center to about 1,900 acres.

"It will create a greater opportunity for trails," Landavazo said about the newest acquisition. "It's identified in the Multiple Species Conservation Plan as a core linkage area."

Together, the Friends group and the county Parks and Recreation Department spent \$450,000 for 40 acres intended for the preserve. Landavazo said the Friends were responsible for \$190,000 of the purchase of six acres that included a house and land that the previous landowner had used for an orchard.

Because the county's money was restricted to only land purchases that preserve species, it could not contribute to the purchase of the six acres, Landavazo said.

In 2007, the county received \$23 million from the U.S. Department of Interior's Cooperative Endangered Species Fund to help acquire open space as part of its Multiple Species Conservation Plan.

The Friends had eyed the six-acre property with the intent of using the house on the site for a community center. Money for the purchase included \$10,000 from the Parker Foundation in San Diego, and the Tides Foundation helped pay for a mailing campaign and printing to bring in more money, Landavazo said.

Once the site was acquired, however, the group abandoned the idea of converting the house because the project would be too expensive, Landavazo said.

The group owned the property for about four months, but subdivided it from the larger site and have since sold it, leaving 34 acres for the preserve.

Escrow on the land purchase closed about two months ago, but the Friends had no dedication ceremony or even an announcement.

On Saturday, however, Landavazo said the 100-member volunteer group probably will celebrate the acquisition when the Friends meet for their annual meeting at 10 a.m. in the Valley Center Library, 29200 Cole Grade Road. The meeting also will include a discussion about the collapse of bee colonies.

This is the third land acquisition for the Friends, Landavazo said. The preserve was about 1,676 acres when the group first started purchasing land.

"Our organization works to expand the preserve because there's a lot of open space around it," he said. "We're very concerned about keeping the wildlife corridor open."

The Friends have about \$150,000, including money it received from reselling the six acres, in reserve for future land acquisitions. Landavazo said the group would like to another 1,000 acres to the preserve, but must wait until landowners decide to sell.