

## **Escondido caught off guard by request to annex Rancho Guejito**

**By J. Harry Jones**

A vast expanse of pristine land – the largest privately held parcel in San Diego County – may be up for development in a surprise announcement by its owners.

Called Rancho Guejito, the 21,000-acre site northeast of Escondido is the last intact Mexican land grant in the state.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune

With grassy valleys and chaparral-covered hills dotted with oak trees, the 21,000-acre Rancho Guejito parcel near Escondido is the last intact Mexican land grant in California.

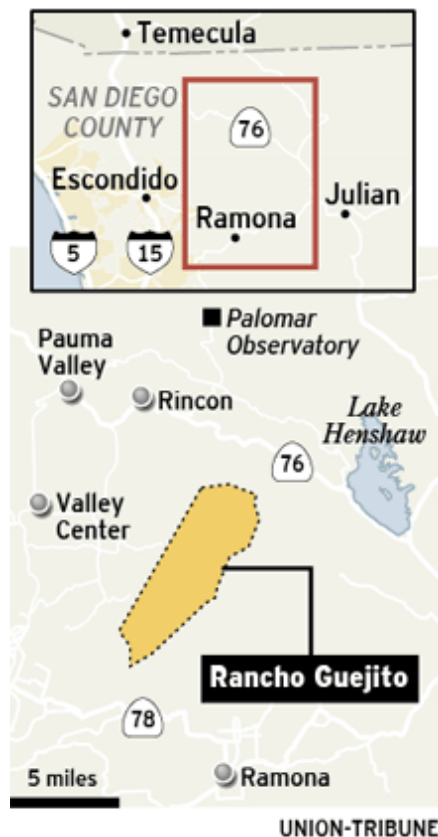
In a letter to Escondido officials, the owners have asked the city to consider annexing the property, possibly for development of “a university medical school research campus,” as well as for housing, business development, recreation and other uses.

If annexed by Escondido, Rancho Guejito would nearly double the size of the city.

The proposal excited city leaders but stunned environmentalists and the county supervisor who represents the area. The ranch is considered by many to be one of the most important open spaces remaining in the county, and the late owner's widow said less than a year ago that she didn't intend to develop the property.

Temecula attorney Henry Rupp, representing the widow and the other owners, sent the letter, which the city received Wednesday.

“We believe each of the plans under consideration can affect the growth of the city of Escondido in a highly favorable manner,” Rupp wrote. “Rather than simply becoming a bedroom community for San Diego-bound commuters, Escondido could develop its own reputation as a center of higher learning and medical research.”



Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler and City Manager Clay Phillips said yesterday that they are excited about the possibility of such a huge piece of property becoming part of the city.

Phillips said Rupp approached him about a month ago and followed it up with the letter this week.

What university is being considered is unclear. Rupp said there have been some “preliminary discussions” about the creation of the campus, but he could not discuss specifics because nothing concrete has developed.

Rupp said many ideas, including not developing the ranch, are still being explored.

The ranch is owned by the Rodney Company, whose principals are Nancy Coates, who is the widow of a Philadelphia millionaire, and her children. In February, after rumors circulated about Guejito's development, Coates, who is in her 80s, said she had no intention of ever developing it.

“We're trying to keep it in pristine state,” she said. “We want to keep this as the greatest piece of California property anywhere.”

Coates, who lives in Philadelphia, made those comments during a luncheon at Guejito's mountain-top ranch house. Among those in attendance was county Supervisor Bill Horn, whose district includes the land.

“I've been blindsided by this,” Horn said yesterday. “I've talked face to face with the family and through all the years I've been told they want to protect that land.

“I'm amazed by the letter. My first reaction is to keep this in the unincorporated part of the county. My second reaction is that it would be very difficult for Escondido to pull this within its sphere of influence.”

Annexations must be approved by the Local Agency Formation Commission, a state-chartered panel Horn sits on.

“They would face a Merriman-type of road block, I can tell you that,” Horn said, referring to Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman.

Land owners sometimes seek annexation to cities because they can provide access to water and sewage systems and other services.

Rancho Guejito is not contiguous with Escondido, which is required for annexation. That means the city also would have

to annex land near Lake Wohlford.

The Escondido City Council is holding workshops on Tuesday and Wednesday to talk about a range of subjects, including updating the city's general plan. Rupp said he will attend and talk about the proposal.

Pfeiler said she expected it to be a “huge subject of discussion.”

Environmentalists expressed dismay that the ranch, which remains much the same as it has been for hundreds of years, could be developed.

“Rancho Guejito must be preserved,” said Dan Silver, executive director of Endangered Habitats League, which is based in Los Angeles. “It's shocking. This proposal is an outrage from a planning standpoint, a cultural standpoint, a biological standpoint and from an historical standpoint.”

“The development of Rancho Guejito in any way would be an enormous tragedy for people and nature,” said David Hogan, a local representative for the Center for Biological Diversity, a national organization. “This is really bad news and appears to shed light on what now appears to have been misinformation spread by the property owners. I wonder what side of the mouth they are talking out of.”

Marjorie Deskovic, a curator at the Valley Center Historical Museum, which has had a Rancho Guejito display up for the past 11 months, said she was surprised, because Nancy Coates “all but promised” there would be no development on the property when she came to the museum in February to present a donation.

The ranch encompasses about 36 square miles between state Routes 76 and 78, the San Diego Wild Animal Park and the Cleveland National Forest. It has elevations ranging from 1,000 feet to 4,221 feet above sea level, and features low grassy valleys, peaks, rocky ridges and chaparral-covered hills studded with oak trees.

It was purchased by Benjamin Coates in 1974 for \$10 million after an attempt by the state to acquire it for a park fell through. It has been used as a cattle ranch ever since.

When California was considering buying Guejito, the state Department of Parks and Recreation said the area “has significant archaeological and historic values and contains significant floral and faunal resources of considerable diversity. ... The stand of Englemann Oak at Rancho Guejito are possibly the finest to be found anywhere. Wildlife include eagles, mountain lions, and deer.”

Benjamin Coates lived there at times for 30 years until his death in 2004. He was occasionally seen riding his horse on the property, which is made up of 96 contiguous parcels.

University of California and Cal State University officials said yesterday that they were unaware of the potential project and not involved with it.

Others said San Diego County may be able to sustain another research university but demand will depend on a school's focus and quality.

“The question of need is a hard one to answer,” said Julie Meier Wright, president and CEO of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp. “San Diego is a knowledge-based economy, and many industries demand people with post-secondary education skills.”

For years, business associates and activists have talked about unmet demand for college education in the state. But local educators say it's very region specific.

“The state certainly needs more access to higher education. That's a well-known fact,” said Constance Carroll, chancellor of the San Diego Community College District. “But it really depends on the specifics. The South Bay has a tremendous need for baccalaureate and graduate level institutions. I really don't know about the north.”

Opening a major research university is a massive undertaking that usually takes hundreds of millions of dollars.

The last public research university in California to open, the University of California Merced, took 17 years from planning stages to its opening day in September 2005.

