

north valley

community connection

\$1.3 Million Secured to Turn Oakridge Estate into a Public Park

By Carl Robinette



Hollywood has been the frenzied spectacle we know today since Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith made their first silent films, although it might have been a little less crowded back then. During the golden age of Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s the stars of LALA land turned to the San Fernando Valley to get away from the buzz of city life, buying up the open spaces in what is now Northridge to build rural equestrian getaways.

Today it would be a stretch to call Northridge a rural community, but one of the original celebrity ranches, the Oakridge Estate, sits in disrepair along Devonshire Street waiting to be rediscovered by Valley residents.

That day of rediscovery might not be too far away. The Oak Ridge Estate Public Advisory Board announced in December that \$1.3 million in funding has been secured to turn 7.5 acres of the ten-acre estate into a public park.

"It's really great that Councilman Englander's office has been able to secure the funds," said Steve Harris, president of Friends of Oakridge. "This is really the beginning of getting the park up and running."

The money will be allocated from Proposition K funding, a park bond measure approved by voters in 1996 that generates \$25 million every year to improve and increase park and recreation space in Los Angeles and incorporated neighborhoods.

Oakridge is part of the history of the Valley, Harris said, and it represents a part of Northridge's cultural past.

Originally part of a 130-acre tract purchased to be a breeding ranch for race horses by Barbara Stanwyck and Zeppo Marx in the 1930's, the estate features Stanwyck's original ranch house. The house and surrounding property was later purchased by Jack Oakie for whom it was named Oakridge. Oakie and his wife, Victoria Horne, lived in the house for all of their married years.

The house and the property now shows little of its former glory as it has seen little maintenance over the years and has been the victim of occasional vandalism.

The funds will be made available in July of 2013 and will be used primarily on the vacant land to create a play area and trails and other passive recreation spaces. A small portion of the funding will go toward repairs on the house.

The design and planning phase of the project will take about a year as the public advisory board is looking for as much community involvement as possible, Harris said.

"It is important that the community knows it's their park and they take ownership," he said. "One of the things that I've noticed is the amount of public support and interest in the property. It already seems to be part of the community."

Recent fiscal setbacks and staff reductions with Los Angeles Recreation and Parks Department who will eventually maintain and implement Oakridge Park have been the biggest challenges in getting the project up and running, said Harris.

Renovation of the property has been a long time coming. It became public space in 2009 when then Councilman Greig Smith purchased the land for the City of Los Angeles with funds from the California State Quimby Act.

In addition to the plans for the open space, the plan includes appointing a caretaker to maintain the house which will become a site for docent tours, community events and educational opportunities.

Education on the historical significance of the thoroughbred and Hollywood in the Valley is planned to be one of the main purposes of the project.

"All of the community is behind the project," said Dave Hasson, Chair of the Oakridge Estate Public Advisory Board. "We've had just about 100 percent positive feedback."

With \$1 million of the total funding going to construction, Hasson hopes that development the park will create some new job opportunities, but for now it is unclear as the project is in the very early stages of planning and public advisory meetings are currently being planned for 2013.