

Beckstoffer donates vineyard to Land Trust

"All of us that came here in the '60s and '70s were into the goal of making great money and great wine... Our legacy will be these vineyards."

— Andy Beckstoffer



photo by David Ryan

LEFT: David Michul, Beckstoffer Vineyards vice president viticultural and vineyard operations, and Jim Lincoln, vineyard manager, at Vineyard X, which will be preserved from development.

By David Ryan

STAFF WRITER

Inside a barn near Yountville, vineyard crew managers sit in a circle discussing the business of harvesting grapes.

Outside an open door, rows of grapevines stretch in manicured lines, with nutrient-rich earth between them.

Vineyard owner Andy Beckstoffer wants to make sure that's a scene that plays out time and again on the land long after he's gone.

In what could be the beginning of a huge donation to perpetuity, he said plans to eventually donate conservation easements on 900 of his 1,000 acres of county vineyards to the Land Trust of Napa County.

The Land Trust recently announced Beckstoffer donated a conservation easement on all four parcels of Vineyard X, a 40-acre property neighboring Brix Restaurant at 7317 St. Helena Highway near Yountville.

Although Beckstoffer admitted it was unlikely

the land would be turned into housing in the near future, the conservation easement would keep the land free from further development decades from now, when yet unforeseen growth may change the face of the valley.

"We just eliminated the possibility of adding four homes and four wineries on the site," he said.

John Hoffnagle, executive director of the Land Trust, said it was a great deal for the land preservation nonprofit.

"Each one of those parcels can have a large estate," he explained.

A conservation easement freezes the level of development the way it is on the day it's donated.

In the case of Vineyard X, it has one home for farmworker housing. Even if pests devastate the land, it will stay safe from further development.

"There's no provision that says if ag doesn't pay, you can get out of it," he said.

According to the Land Trust, Beckstoffer

Vineyards is one of the 20 largest grape growers in California, owning 3,238 acres of vineyards in Napa, Mendocino and Lake Counties.

In Napa County Beckstoffer plans to make sure vineyard land is used only for grapes.

"The plan is to place the majority of it in easements," he said.

Some pieces of his property he sees as particularly lucrative to development.

"For example, the piece behind Pinot Blanc (restaurant) could easily be turned into houses."

The St. Helena general plan has a portion of that vineyard designated for high density residential use.

Trust president sold Beckstoffer on idea

Beckstoffer said Joel Tranmer, president of the Land trust, had a large role in convincing him to donate the easement.

Tranmer is a retired business owner who volunteers his time as the president of the Land Trust.

"I've known Andy for years and I've always known he wanted to protect his land," he said. "He was just looking for the best vehicle."

That can be no small task given the legal avenues that heirs to an estate can pursue.

"Will's get contested all the time," he said. "A hundred years from now someone could say Andy didn't know what he was doing."

Or, he said, they could argue to a judge that agriculture is not the best use of the land, legally breaking the will and paving the way for development.

But conservation easements can't be contested, Tranmer said.

They're immune from the legal contests wills encounter, and are recognized by federal agencies and the Internal Revenue Service.

For donors, the benefits also include a one-time tax write-off to the tune of the value of the homes or winery sites that might be developed.

According to the Land Trust, Beckstoffer's donation brings the total conservation easements given to the Land Trust up to 8,800 acres from 36 vintners, grapegrowers and agricultural land owners in the valley.

The nonprofit said it has preserved almost

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33,000 acres of land since its inception in 1976.

That's about six percent of the 505,000 acres of land in the county.

Hoffnagle said most acres preserved by the Trust occupy the Howell or Mayacamas mountains and other parts of the valley "viewshed."

Tranmer said the largest donation the trust ever received was a 1,300 acre ranch from the late Jiles Mead, who also donated \$1 million.

The organization has eight full-time employees and about 200 active volunteers out of 1600 members.

Tranmer, whose father was one of the founding members of the land Trust, said the

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nonprofit's annual budget is about \$650,000.

"Most of what we do is monitoring," Tranmer said.

Each year, he said someone from the land trust goes out to a protected site and makes sure the land isn't developed or encroached upon.

Easement is a gift to Napa Valley

Beckstoffer was part of the so-called third wave of pioneers that helped shape the Napa Valley into what it is today.

"All of us that came here in the 60s and 70s were all into the goal of making great money and great wine," he said.

And while some of that money from wealthy wine families is regularly donated to charities and fundraisers, Beckstoffer said he and his wife thought protecting the land would be a long-lasting gift to the valley.

"Our legacy will be these vineyards," he said.