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Volunteers Rally to Save Will Rogers State Park

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Danielle Gillespie, Staff Writer

When sisters Nancy Proano and Martha Willis heard that state legislators might close Will Rogers State Historic Park because of financial woes, they wanted to help keep the park open.

The sisters were among approximately 300 volunteers who spruced up the park on Friday and Saturday as part of the 'Will Rogers Never Met a State Park He Didn't Like' event hosted by the newly formed Will Rogers Ranch Foundation.

The foundation organized the event to give citizens a chance to show their love of state parks, said Will Rogers' great-granddaughter Jennifer Rogers Etcheverry.

'We want to make people feel like this is their park,' Etcheverry said. 'Next time they come to Will Rogers, they can point out what they did.'

On Friday, Proano and Willis, who live in Culver City and Lake Balboa respectively, slathered their paint rollers with primer and brushed the interior walls of the park's main barn.

'I love this park,' said Proano, whose hair was flecked with white paint. 'It reminds me of my dad who has since passed away. We used to hike, have picnics and watch polo' It would be a shame if they closed it.'

California State Parks has proposed closing 48 of the 278 state parks and reducing lifeguard staffing at 16 beaches in response to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's request that the department reduce its general fund budget by 10 percent. The state faces a \$14.5-billion budget deficit.

Salaries are the largest part of State Parks' budget and the closures would allow the department to eliminate 136 positions, said Roy Stearns, communication deputy director for California State Parks. This means the department could reduce its general fund budget by \$13.3 million. However, State Parks would lose \$3.7 million in revenue generated by day-use fees at the 48 parks.

State legislators will decide later this spring or summer about whether the parks will be closed.

If they decide to close Will Rogers, the property would revert to the Rogers family. Betty Rogers, Will's wife, deeded the 186-acre property to the state in 1944 with that stipulation. 'The family doesn't want it given back,' Etcheverry said. 'The family wants to keep it open as a memorial to my great-grandfather.'

To provide additional funding for the park, Etcheverry formed the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation with Trudi Sandmeier, whose grandfather was Will Rogers' personal assistant, and Todd Vradenberg, a member of the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation, which supports children and infants with pulmonary disease.

Etcheverry is hopeful the foundation and state can partner to keep the park open.

'We are working with California State Parks, and they are fully supportive of us,' she said. 'I am optimistic.'

The foundation is interviewing candidates for its board and will begin organizing fundraisers soon. Residents can become members for a fee ranging from \$35 to \$1,000, which also benefits the foundation's efforts.

Etcheverry hopes to raise enough money to restore the historic barn and all the rooms of the ranch house as well as open and operate a gift shop.

On Friday, youth from the park's Westside Riding School giggled and chatted as they cleaned the horses' stalls inside Jim's Barn (named after Will Rogers' son).

'I ride here, and I heard they might close it down,' said Sophie Offer, a seventh-grader at Crossroads School. 'I was really inspired to actually do something rather than just ride horses here. I wanted to help and make a difference.'

The 12-year-old has taken lessons from Westside Riding School instructor Dorte Lindegaard at the park for the past two years.

Talia Lawrence, a 16-year-old at Wildwood School, also felt inspired to lend a hand. 'I came here a lot as a kid for picnics and to ride horses. It's a beautiful place with a lot of history and is one of the main reasons I decided to help preserve the parks,' she said.

Lawrence, a Mar Vista resident, started a campaign 'Students Against the Closure of California Parks' and created a Web site, www.saccap.synthasite.com, where she is selling buttons to benefit state parks.

'These parks are indispensable to not only the people but also the wildlife,' Lawrence said.

On Saturday, Academy Award-winning actress Diane Keaton helped paint Jim's Barn to show her support. Volunteers also restored the hitching rail that Will Rogers once used to tie his horse in front of his house in the early 1930s. They celebrated the completion of that project with a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by Councilman Bill Rosendahl.

He and Councilman Ed Reyes wrote a resolution against closing state parks and reducing lifeguard staffing that the Los Angeles City Council approved on April 2.

Volunteers received free lunch, T-shirts and bandanas from the Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation for their efforts.

'I'm impressed with the number of volunteers, but I'm more impressed with what they got done,' said Randy Young, a Pacific Palisades resident and historian who helped organize the event.

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