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FORMER CHEVRON LAND TRANSFORMED INTO 1,800-ACRE PARK

Equestrians, Birders, Mountain Bikers and Hikers Discovering Newer Santa Barbara County Open Space

SANTA MARIA, CA—The petroleum industry trucks that once trundled along the rolling landscape of the Central Coast's Solomon Hills have given way to mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers who now enjoy the solid trails originally built for a very different cause.

Such was the idea when the City of Santa Maria, located an hour north of Santa Barbara, purchased the property from Chevron for \$2.5 million and first presented Los Flores Ranch to the community in 2009. At 1,774 acres, this regional open space park is not only one of the largest of its kind in Santa Barbara County, but is deemed one of the few "passive recreational areas" in the region, meaning an undeveloped space or environmentally sensitive area that requires minimal recreational impact.

"It's a place to take the family and enjoy the land as it is," said Dennis Smitherman, recreation supervisor for the City of Santa Maria Recreation and Parks Department. "The fact that the park has little impact on the natural environment is a testament to the wisdom of these types of uses."

Indeed, outdoor enthusiasts including birders, photographers and wildflower seekers are increasingly discovering the natural charm of Los Flores Ranch. Comprised of trails through rolling hills, rocky outcroppings and an array of trees, plants and wildlife, the property lies about eight miles south of Santa Maria on the east side of Highway 101.

"We have some of the most expansive distant vistas of the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Maria Valley available at any public park," Smitherman said. "Our variety of terrain offers challenging hikes as well as gentle routes that allow entry-level walkers the chance to see stunning scenery without going far." He added that the property's abundance of spring wildflowers treats the eye to an explosion of color and that a huge native oak tree rehabilitation project is underway with the planting of more than 200 oak trees.

"The park also contains some unique habitats and has a rich and varied history," Smitherman said.

Indeed, roadrunners, bobcats, wild pigs, hawks and jack rabbits are regularly spied on the property, as are 150 head of cattle, which are allowed to roam freely in order to graze and reduce the risk of wildfire.

The park offers eight miles of trails on existing dirt paths and paved roads that were originally created for oil and ranch operations. Smitherman explained that all equestrian and mountain biking routes are trail-based and low impact.

Smitherman added that people enjoy picnicking and lounging on the park Visitor Center's comfortable outdoor deck and umbrella tables. Other tables and bleacher-style seating are available throughout the park and can be customized for groups. Guided hikes and other events for a variety of ages are planned monthly.

For details and updates, the public is asked to visit the Los Flores Ranch Facebook page or phone (805) 925-0951 X985. The park web site is www.ci.santa-maria.ca.us/3083.shtml.

“The park offers so much beauty just outside of the city limits,” Smitherman said. “Our big goal is to let people know it’s here. It lends itself to a huge variety of groups. There really is something for everyone.”

Open Thursday through Sunday from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., Los Flores Ranch asks that all visitors check in at the park Visitors Center located at 6271 Dominion Road. Here, visitors pay a \$3 use fee (\$1.50 for seniors; youth 15 and younger free) and declare any animals in tow. Dogs on leashes are welcome. Hours of operation may vary depending on season and inclement weather. Please check the Los Flores Ranch Facebook page prior to visiting. Directions: Heading south from Santa Maria, take the Clark Avenue exit and turn left. Next, turn right on Dominion Road. Equestrians use a separate park entrance, taking Exit 161 from Highway 101.

For information about Santa Maria Valley attractions, local lodging, wine tasting and more, visit www.santamaria.com or call the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce & Visitor and Convention Bureau at (800) 331-3779.

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