



This article announces the McGrath family's generous gift and helped launch the NTC Project.



Rescue dog group gets \$1.5 million McGrath grant

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Earlier this year, the Ojai-based National Disaster Search Dog Foundation went looking for donations to build a national training center. And much like the dogs it trains, it found what it was looking for.

The foundation announced Wednesday that it had received a \$1.5 million grant to buy a 37-acre property in Santa Paula to build the largest rescue dog training facility in North America.

"Let's just say the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus came early this year," Executive Director Debra Tosch said.

The foundation adopts dogs from pounds and shelters, then trains them to be rescue dogs that search through disaster rubble to find victims. They then donate the dogs to fire and police departments across the country.

The dogs are currently trained in Gilroy, but the group wants to open a major facility in Santa Paula.

After reading an article in The Star about the organization's needs, Sean McGrath, whose family has deep roots in the county, started looking for some property to buy and donate, Tosch said. A few months later, he approached her about the Santa Paula location and it was recently put in escrow. The \$1.5 million that the McGrath family gave to buy the property is the largest donation in the group's history.



Future site for rescue dog training in Santa Paula, CA



Sean and Tom McGrath walking the NTC land

The foundation is still years and millions of dollars away from opening the center's doors. Now that it has the property, it needs to assess what kind of buildings will be constructed.

The wish list includes a kennel, classrooms, veterinary clinic and a house for entertaining guests, Tosch said.

There are still a few regulatory hoops to jump through, but Tosch said she's confident that the county will allow the facility to be built.

She said she held a meeting with neighbors in the Wheeler Canyon Road neighborhood to let them know the group's intentions. Although, some were concerned about traffic and barking, she said most are OK with the development.

At its peak, the facility would train about 30 dogs a year. So far, the group has trained 85 dogs that have been used in a variety of emergencies, including searching through the rubble after Hurricane Katrina, the La Conchita landslide and at Ground Zero after Sept. 11, 2001.

Tosch said moving toward a national training center would not have been possible without McGrath's donation.

"We called him our little angel," she said.