

# Her conservation campaign: Oswit Land Trust's Jane Garrison eyes expansion across Coachella Valley and beyond

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## ENVIRONMENT

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It's 2016 and Jane Garrison is hiking in Oswit Canyon when she comments on the view to another hiker.

“And this woman says, ‘Well enjoy it now because this is all going to be destroyed. They’re going to be building houses.’ I couldn’t wrap my head around how they could be developing this.”

Garrison went home and called the city – for the first time in her life – and started asking questions.

She discovered that in 2006, the city approved plans for the Eagle Canyon Development, proposed as 160 homes on 64 acres on the 117-acre parcel in Oswit Canyon. The project never broke ground, but in 2016 a proposal surfaced to revive the plan.

With no formal background in conservation or development, and while still learning about the intricacies of zoning and the entitlement process – “I knew nothing,” Garrison recalls – she founded Save Oswit Canyon, starting with a Facebook page to organize community members against the Eagle Canyon project.

Responding to this community opposition, the developer eventually pulled the proposed project to redesign it as a smaller development. Still, Garrison stuck to her motto of “Not one house, not one shovel.”

Save Oswit Canyon submitted a petition with over 4,000 signatures asking the city to rezone the land as an “environmentally sensitive area,” which was slated to go before voters in a special election before the Palm Springs City Council voted to rezone the area on its own in 2017, sparking a lawsuit from developers. Save Oswit Canyon kept negotiating with developers, and eventually reached a time-sensitive agreement in summer 2019: Save Oswit Canyon could purchase the property if it could raise the first \$1 million for the purchase by the end of the year.

Save Oswit Canyon officially incorporated as a nonprofit in 2019, and by mid-December, the group had raised \$1 million from the community for the purchase. Another \$1 million from the city and additional funding from grants secured by the Coachella Valley Mountain Conservancy from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Wildlife Conservation Board rounded out the \$7.15 million sale. Save Oswit Canyon closed on the property in October 2020. Shortly afterward, the group announced a name change to Oswit Land Trust, creating a local land trust with a new mission of acquiring and conserving property throughout the area.

“I would love to know who this woman was who I met on that canyon, because I would love to thank her for what she did,” Garrison said to a crowd of a few hundred supporters while recounting the right-place-at-the-right-time origin story at Oswit Land Trust’s annual donor and supporter appreciation party in November.

A former child actor and model, Garrison is charismatic and passionate, effortlessly commanding a crowd’s attention and comfortable in the spotlight. Garrison hosted the event in the backyard of her home, the historic William Holden Estate in Deepwell Estates, which she purchased with her husband in 2017.

## **'We are not slowing down at all'**

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Oswit’s Land Trust’s story mirrors efforts in communities across California and elsewhere as cities grapple with the need for more housing and community opposition to development.

The cycle typically goes something like this: community members find out about a development planned in their neighborhood, and often quickly and informally organize their opposition through petitions, appeals, city decisions, public comments, and social media, until they achieve their desired outcome or until all these options are exhausted.

But fewer groups do what Garrison and Oswit are doing, which is building on this momentum, transitioning away from opposing one specific development and into a broader organization.

Oswit Land Trust is stepping into the conservation world at a time when concerns over preserving open space are high, and as government agencies are increasingly acknowledging the role of conservation and natural lands in the fight against climate change. Federal and state governments are targeting “30x30” goals to conserve 30% of land and water by 2030.

At the same time, the state is currently experiencing a housing crisis that experts widely say is due to a lack of new housing production. State housing laws require local governments to identify potential sites for development to meet state-mandated housing production goals, which include target numbers for high-income, moderate-income, low-income, and very low-income housing units.

In some communities, this tension between conservation efforts and housing needs has led to accusations of NIMBYism – “not in my backyard” – while in other cases, housing opponents have coopted conservation and environmental issues as a reason for their opposition. Earlier this year, the small Silicon Valley town of Woodside infamously tried to block a state law allowing duplexes on single-family lots by declaring the entire town a “mountain-lion habitat.”

Garrison maintains that the NIMBY label doesn't apply to Oswit: “You can pretty much count on one hand the projects that we have opposed, and new projects go before the Planning Commission constantly. So we're not anti-development, we're anti-development in the wrong places.”

While the state and local cities pursue these dual goals of conservation and housing, Oswit is showing staying power in its transition to a full-fledged conservation nonprofit: The organization has received millions in grant funding, and also has found willing donors in philanthropy-focused Palm Springs, including one who purchased an entire golf course outright and gave it to Oswit Land Trust.

Oswit Land Trust’s acquisitions in the past two years total around 4,000 acres, starting with the 114-acre Oswit Canyon in 2020. In April, Oswit negotiated the purchase of about 3,500 acres of desert land above East Palm Canyon Drive in Palm Springs, often called Palm Hills or the Goat Trails, a large swath of land that conservation groups had eyed for decades. That purchase also marked one of the largest conservation buys in Coachella Valley history. In July, the group announced the purchase of Mesquite Golf Course, renamed the Prescott

Preserve, in honor of Brad Prescott, who purchased the golf course and donated it to the land trust. Later that month, Oswit acquired 30 acres near the popular South Lykken Trail's northern trailhead on Mesquite Avenue.

While the organization has only acquired land in Palm Springs so far, it's now looking to expand outside the city and the Coachella Valley and into other parts of Riverside County and Imperial County, according to Garrison.

"We are not slowing down at all – we're just gearing up. We are a young organization, but we're mighty and we have a lot of vision," Garrison told supporters at the November event.

Oswit Land Trust currently has grant applications in to purchase three separate properties totaling nearly 1,000 acres – two of which are outside of the Coachella Valley.

## **How Oswit targets properties**

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How Oswit – and Garrison – choose target properties depends on several factors, including whether the property faces potential development. But for the past decade, conservation and development in the Coachella Valley have been largely guided by the Coachella Valley Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan, which became effective in 2008 and identified target Conservation Areas. These Conservation Areas are generally hillsides and open desert. The Coachella Valley Conservation Commission – a joint powers authority of local governments – is tasked with overseeing and managing the plan, including purchasing land from willing sellers within the conservation areas and then managing that land. As a nonprofit, Oswit Land Trust can acquire parcels outside of these conservation areas.

"I think the Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan was passed as a balance between conservation and development, and the conservancy doesn't want to interrupt that... From my perspective, what the conservancy tries to do is seek a balance," said Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy Executive Director Jim Karpiak.

But Karpiak added that "there's a lot of very important habitat or land that's good for recreation that was left out of the plan for various legal reasons or political reasons at the time," including places that were left out because there was a plan to develop them. According to Karpiak, some plans have faded due to changes in the economy or a lack of interest from the owner.

"(Oswit) is filling an important niche because the (Coachella Valley Conservation Commission) won't take title to those lands," Karpiak said.

Oswit Canyon, a portion of Palm Hills, and the Mesquite Ridge property along the South Lykken are all properties that represent important habitat and popular recreation areas, but that were left out of the conservation plan.

Erin Heskett, vice president of conservation initiatives for the Land Trust Alliance – of which Oswit is a member – also says that the organization is filling an important geographic niche, filling a gap between two "long-standing" land trusts. Further north, the Mojave Desert Land Trust acquires desert landscapes in the high desert and beyond, while the Anza Borrego Land Trust acquires land to the south in that region. Heskett says that land trusts themselves play a role in acquiring private land for conservation.

"Private lands in this country represent a critical opportunity to achieve (the country's) land conservation goals and needs for all kinds of benefits. Land trusts generally are really important actors in helping to secure the private lands, by working with conservation-minded and willing landowners, and also by purchasing lands that are important for conservation and other other values outright," Heskett said.

There are a few different ways that land trusts can protect land from development, including placing privately owned lands under conservation easements or purchasing the property outright. Oswit currently holds the ownership to its properties, and also places deed restrictions on the properties to ensure that they remain conservation lands even in a "worst-case scenario" of the properties changing ownership, according to Garrison.

According to Oswit's strategic plan, the organization considers several key questions when deciding whether to pursue a property. These include whether the property provides critical habitat, has endangered or threatened species, if it's adjacent to or could help create a wildlife corridor, or if it contains water, heavy vegetation, or wildlife. Oswit also considers whether the property is "threatened with imminent or future development," and if it would "excite our supporters if we were buying it with donations."

Oswit weighs whether state and federal wildlife agencies are "excited about seeing the property conserved," and if the property would be of interest to funding partners to acquire with grant funding. Finally, Oswit considers whether the price per acre is either lower than comparable properties or the fair market value.

"Our mission is to save land from impending destruction. So we focus on property that has no protection. So if there was a piece of land way up in the middle of a mountain, we're not going to make that a priority, because what is the chance of of something happening to it?" said Garrison.

## **Balancing conservation and housing**

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Many conservation efforts in the valley have focused on the hillsides and undeveloped desert landscapes, but Oswit recently bucked this trend by purchasing the Mesquite Golf Course, representing a developed property surrounded by homes.

Purchasing local golf courses and then converting them back into natural desert habitat has been a major goal for Garrison since even before the Oswit Canyon purchase was finalized. Sometime in 2018, when Garrison and Save Oswit Canyon were still fighting to conserve Oswit Canyon, a friend sent Garrison a sales flyer that included both the Mesquite Golf Course and the nearby Bel Air Greens.

“Palm Springs is very close to being built out. But you do have these little pockets that are worth saving,” Garrison said.

Garrison has called plans for the golf course like a “central preserve” for Palm Springs, akin to Central Park in New York, and has emphasized that the preserve will include an easier and more accessible walking path than other trails that deal with steep elevation gain along the hillsides. She still has her eye on Bel Air Greens, where a recent proposal calls for 74 single-family home lots. City planning commissioners criticized the proposal at a meeting this summer, but the city won’t have the final say on what happens to that property: The land is owned by members of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and city agreements with the tribe state that any land-use decisions there can be appealed to the tribal council, which can overturn city decisions.

"This is our land. We're going to do with it what we see fit," John Andreas, a member of the tribe and one of the property owners, said at that meeting. "And what we are going to do is we are going to develop it, and we are not going to keep it open space. And all the land owners are on board, and we are going to develop the property whether they like it or not."

Responding to the proposal to convert the golf course into a preserve, Andreas said: "That's Indian land, and you guys have all these things you guys want to do to keep it open and add value to your homes that are around that, but yet we're still getting screwed in the end."

In Palm Springs, city rules adopted in 2019 require that any redevelopment of a former golf course property preserve at least 50% of the property as open space.

The tension over Bel Air Greens and other golf courses in Palm Springs comes at a time when some say golf courses would represent prime locations for housing development, since they're often large swaths of land already surrounded by existing development.

One bill proposed last year by Assemblymember Cristina Garcia, D-Bell Gardens, would have incentivized cities to convert municipal golf courses to affordable housing, although it died during the committee process. The bill also would have provided \$50 million in state grants for developers.

“Dense urban communities like mine have very few feasible spaces left to build, the state and local governments need to start thinking outside the box when it comes to building affordable housing units,” said Garcia in a press release reintroducing a similar proposal this year.

The entire six-county Southern California region must plan for over 1.3 million housing units between October 2021 and October 2029, and 2,557 of these housing units are allocated to Palm Springs, which includes 45 very-low-income units and 408 low-income units.

Affordable housing development in the region has typically been concentrated on the east side of the valley, according to Lift to Rise's affordable housing pipeline map, and Palm Springs just recently broke ground on the city's first affordable housing project in over a decade last year.

Ian Gabriel, director of Data, Policy, and Planning at Lift to Rise, a non-profit focused on housing and affordability in the Coachella Valley, says he doesn't oppose local golf courses being used for conservation instead of affordable housing production, but stressed the need for local cities to "get creative about what land can be used for affordable housing."

"Palm Springs is an example where there's relatively less available land compared to somewhere like Desert Hot Springs or the city of Coachella. So it is a little more difficult to find land to meet the need for affordable housing that exists. There's a shortage of affordable housing in every single one of the Coachella Valley cities. And the only way we're going to actually be able to address that shortage, which in my opinion, is a crisis-level shortage, is by identifying the types of land that could support that development," Gabriel said.

"I think that there are alternatives to golf courses or conservation lands as long as we can get creative about unlocking non-traditional land uses for affordable housing," he continued. "We need to coordinate regionally and share information about available land, whether it's a golf course or something else. I wouldn't say that it's necessarily a bad idea to put affordable housing on a golf course. But I think that there are a lot more types of land uses that exist currently that may make it actually easier to build on."

Gabriel pointed to the large number of vacant parcels that dot the valley, owned by private individuals, churches, governments, and school districts, as well as the list of potential housing sites that Palm Springs identified in its Housing Element.

Garrison says Oswit wouldn't be interested in "a golf course that is in the middle of housing, completely surrounded, and just in the middle of development." But Mesquite Golf Course and the other nearby courses Oswit is eyeing are "a very unique situation."

"We have the wildlife corridor because of the Tahquitz Creek; there's over a mile of the creek that goes through (Prescott Preserve)," said Garrison, adding that coyotes, foxes, and dozens of different birds have been spotted on the property. "We also have the idea that this is such a large piece of property, when you take this, and you take Bel Air Greens, and you take the city golf course and protect them, then you're looking at like 500 acres of open space. That's huge and important."

Garrison says she wants to see the city place a conservation easement on the Tahquitz Creek Golf course to ensure it remains open space, either as a golf course or otherwise.

## 'I just don't give up'

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Like with Oswit Canyon, acquiring a golf course in Palm Springs achieved a goal that Garrison had intensely focused on for years – both Garrison and others describe her as maintaining an indefatigable focus on properties she's identified for acquisition.

“The biggest thing is, I just don't give up. . . Once you have a goal, and a vision of where you want a project to be, you just don't give up on it. When challenges come up, you just figure out a way around them,” Garrison said.

She attributes this attitude to her past work in animal rescue efforts, including during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

“When you do disaster work, you're dealing with things like seeing a dog stuck up on a roof – and you don't say, ‘Well, I can't get there because there's water around the house.’ That's my goal, the dog I need to get is on the roof, and I'm going to figure out how to get there. When you do disaster work, you have to figure out how to get around obstacles in an instant. With a land trust, we have a little more time, so we figured out how to get around them. (The golf course) took a couple of years to achieve, but we did it,” she said.

The Palm Hills property is another example of this – acquiring the portion of the property that lies within a conservation area was a goal for the local conservation community for decades. Over the years, the Coachella Valley Conservation Commission had made “many” attempts to negotiate with the owner to purchase the property for its fair market value, according to Karpiak, but the owner always wanted to maintain their ability to develop the property.

Back in 2004, the Palm Springs City Council approved property owner Palm Hills Land Corporation's proposal for an 18-hole golf course, a 351-room resort hotel and more than 120 single-family homes in Palm Hills. The decision sparked outrage from residents, who argued the project would be intrusive to the environment and endanger local bighorn sheep. Citizen groups gathered enough petition signatures to spark a ballot referendum, and Palm Springs voters overturned the city council's approval of the project in 2005.

But the referendum only stopped the 2004 proposal from moving forward, and didn't prevent the developer from coming forward with another proposal - making the land a key target for conservation groups.

After the Oswit Canyon purchase, Karpiak mentioned Palm Hills to Garrison in a conversation on what the Oswit Land Trust could focus on next. He caught her up on the background with the property, and the fact that the odds the owner would sell didn't seem optimistic.

“Oswit focused on it like a laser . . . Jane made that her mission, and she is very tenacious and very persuasive, and she was able to just work a real miracle with this guy,” Karpiak said.

Garrison is also skilled at using social media to build support for Oswit's "advocacy arm," mobilizing the nearly 3,000-member strong Oswit Land Trust Facebook group to take action. In addition to property acquisition, Oswit also mobilizes supporters for advocacy efforts, such as opposing a 1.4 million-square-foot fulfillment center proposed near Whitewater in 2021, which the developer ultimately pulled the plans for.

Oswit also teamed up with the Tahquitz Group of the Sierra Club to appeal the approval of a 3.4 million-square-foot warehouse in Desert Hot Springs earlier in the year, which resulted in a settlement that placed more stringent environmental obligations on the developer, including rooftop solar panels. Other advocacy efforts have included pushing back against an 80-home project that Oswit said would destroy the habitat of the endangered Casey's June beetle, and using the Facebook group to call on community members to call or email city officials, HOA board members, and golf course officials en masse regarding activities like a planned bird shoot at the private S at Rancho Mirage or a coyote remediation plan at Mission Hills Country Club – both of which were canceled following the organized public outcry driven by Oswit and PS Wildlife Advocates.

Garrison says her diverse professional background has prepared her to run Oswit Land Trust, in spite of her newness to conservation and development. She spent 10 years working on animal protection efforts with a specialty on elephants, later worked on animal rescue efforts following disasters, and has founded three companies with her husband, Mark, including a product for kidney failure in dogs and cats and a line of non-dairy salad dressings.

Those entrepreneurship endeavors have provided Garrison with the business skills needed at a growing organization like Oswit, she says, and perhaps just as importantly have provided her with the finances necessary to work around 60 hours a week for the land trust for free.

Oswit Land Trust also now has three staff members, including a full-time biologist and a full-time conservation ranger, as well as two maintenance and groundskeeping staff, as the organization continues its growth from a group of citizen activists to a formal conservation organization.

Heskett said many other land trusts also originally started as "just a ragtag group of local citizens doing work to ensure that the natural beauty and natural resources that existed in that community are protected, and eventually evolved into the professional nonprofit organizations they are today, and are able to hold land and steward that land in perpetuity."

Karpiak says he sees Oswit as currently in its next phase of growth as the organization makes that transition.

“I think this is the time where there may be a challenge for them to move from the portion where charisma is so critical to the more mundane portion of raising money to hire staff to manage lands, or dealing with a lawsuit, or all that kind of crud that comes along with property management. As organizations acquire more and more land it becomes a bigger burden to manage them and deal with clean-ups and dumping and trespassers,” Karpiak said.

Garrison said Oswit recently applied for a grant from the state that would allow the organization to expand its capacity to add a new division and hire two new staff members. She expects to hear back about the grant in mid-December.

Meanwhile, every week Oswit Land Trust staff reads through every planning commission and city council agenda for each of the nine cities in the Coachella Valley, as well as Riverside County, to keep an eye on development plans and potential acquisitions – a far cry from when Garrison was getting news about Palm Springs development projects from passerby on the trail.