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Connolly Ranch grows up

After 18 years under Land Trust, teaching farm goes its own way

By MIKE TRELEVEN

Register Staff Writer

Connolly Ranch, west Napa's hands-on educational classroom and working ranch, will now stand on its own two feet.

The popular venue has been granted its own nonprofit status.

It will still be owned by the Land Trust of Napa Coun-

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ty. But instead of taking direction from the Land Trust's board of directors, Connolly Ranch will have its own board. This move allows the Land Trust to focus on its core mission, which is to acquire and preserve open space from development.

The property, on Browns Valley Road at Thompson Avenue, was donated to the Land Trust by Peggy Connolly in 1991.

"I think Peggy Connolly would be happy with this change. It just didn't quite fit into the mission statement of the Land Trust," said Bob Pallas, director and chairman of the board at Connolly Ranch. Under the new plan, Pallas will remain in the position he has held since 2005.

Pallas said he has turned the ranch around. Whereas it formerly ran in the red, it now turns a profit.

Pallas is assembling a board of directors that so far includes Eileen Gordon Chiarello, Barbara Pahre, Leona Siadek, Julie de Polo and Bruce Ketron. The goal is to eventually have no more than 12 directors, with Pallas serving as chairman of the board.

With the new status, look for Connolly Ranch to begin offering more educational programs.

Pallas said during the

school year about 2,550 students on school field trips pass through the hands-on learning farm.

"I want to reach out more to the nonprofits to make use of this facility," he said.

A new program tested this past summer was Food Network celebrity and local chef Michael Chiarello's Dirt to Dine. The event is designed to show elementary-age children the connection between farm, garden and table. The chef takes ranch produce, such as eggs from the hen house or vegetables from the garden, and prepares a meal — with some help from the children.

Other programs at the ranch include classes for foster children and bee-keeping seminars taught by Rob Keller of Napa. UC Master Gardeners have a demonstration plot at the ranch, and 4-H animals, including eight pigs and four sheep, graze on the grounds.

Pallas said summer camps at the center will expand from seven weeks to 10 weeks next year. He is also talking with the Song Bird Rescue Program of the Wildlife Rescue Center of Napa County about offering a home to that struggling agency.

With the increased visibility of Connolly Ranch and the expansion of programs, the board expects to hold more fundraisers and apply for grants from foundations.

For more information go to www.connollyranch.org.