

HIGHER AND HIRE



With shoppers expected to spend 3.7 percent more this holiday season, Ventura County retailers are hiring.

BUSINESS, IC

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2015

VENTURA COUNTY STAR

California pulls the reins on therapeutic riding

Nothing on this planet inspires me like the healing power of equine-assisted therapy, which enriches the quality of life for those with special physical, cognitive and social needs.

When a child who can scarcely walk or talk has the opportunity to mount a horse, sharing the freedom and intimacy of the animal's every movement, the effect is truly miraculous.

I was thrilled therefore to learn that the California Department of Parks and Recreation was seeking applicants to run an equestrian lesson and guided trail-riding concession at Will Rogers State Historic Park in Pacific Palisades that would include therapeutic riding.

According to the state's Request for Proposals, the winning

**BRYAN
MCQUEENEY**

GUEST COLUMNIST

candidate would be expected to "support mental and physical therapeutic equestrian programs for people with special needs."

Ride On came to Ventura County in 2001 precisely because the leaders of the Conejo Recreation and Park District saw value in creating program opportunities for all abilities in our community. The vision demonstrated by the CRPD took an abandoned facility and turned it into a hub of community volunteerism that has seen us deliver thousands of lessons and treatments to all ages and all abilities.

Therapeutic riding at

“ Supporting mental and physical equestrian programs is not just a noble idea; it's a mandate. A decade ago, the state was sued for failing to meet basic accessibility standards in its parks.”

the beautiful home of Will Rogers — what an inspired use of California's natural resources! Unfortunately, the state was only giving lip service to its own goals and objectives.

Three organizations submitted proposals but only one is a recognized leader in equine-assisted therapy: Ride On.

Between our facilities in Newbury Park and in Chatsworth, Ride On provides therapeutic riding lessons to more than 200 mentally and physically disabled children and adults every week. When the Special Olympics World Games

came to Los Angeles this past summer, it was Ride On that ran the equestrian competition. We also serve able-bodied riders, having safely supervised more than 90,000 horseback rides in our 21-year history.

As a nonprofit, we submitted a proposal to the state that highlighted our public-spirited mission — to the benefit of both special-needs riders and the broader community.

Supporting mental and physical equestrian programs is not just a noble idea; it's a mandate. A decade ago, the state was sued for failing to meet basic accessibility

standards in its parks. As part of the settlement, a federal judge issued an order that to this day requires the department to improve architectural and programming access for persons with disabilities.

The state actually deducted points from Ride On because our proposal "focuses on a therapeutic riding program and may reduce availability of lessons and trail rides for able-bodied visitors." Instead of equal access for all, the state penalized Ride On precisely because our proposal would have served the entire community,

able-bodied or not.

Despite acknowledging that Ride On met the guidelines for experience, the state turned that into a negative. Ride On, we are left to conclude, is a little too disabled-friendly for California.

Earlier this year, the Department of Parks and Recreation awarded the Will Rogers contract to Jigsaw Farms, a private operator with apparently the least experience in equine-assisted therapy.

We are appealing that decision before an administrative law judge this month. I don't know how that will turn out, but I do know that the state would do well to follow the leadership shown in Ventura County.

Bryan McQueeney is Ride On's executive director.