



Laguna Foundation, others, feel budget impact

Environmental restoration, education projects in limbo

by George Snyder

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LIMBO — The Laguna Foundation's Learning Center and adjacent barns currently undergoing renovation on the Civil War-era Stone Farm near the Laguna de Santa Rosa on Occidental and Sanford roads. - Photo by George Snyder

Even though California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a package of bills last month to close a \$42 billion state budget gap, the memory of the freeze the lengthy negotiations forced on many state funded area conservation projects lingers on.

That includes, for example, restoration and education grants for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, including money to complete the construction of its Laguna Learning Center on Stone Farm.

“The freeze on state grants has definitely affected us,” said Mark Green, the Laguna Foundation’s associate executive director, “Our \$700,000 grant for the Learning Center was frozen a week before the state was to sign an award contract--the grant was approved by the Coastal Conservancy board, but now it is unclear whether we will ever receive it,” he said.

Stone Farm, near the corner of Occidental and Sanford roads, is owned by the City of Santa Rosa, which has given the Foundation a 50-year lease on the property. The site is also adjacent to a system of Laguna trails being developed by the county’s open space district.

The restored Civil War-era farmhouse is being rehabilitated to serve as headquarters and offices for the Laguna Foundation.

Restored barns on the property are scheduled to have farming uses, house the Learning Center’s agricultural education programs, including a collection of antique horse-drawn farm implements, and provide space for demonstrations of traditional agricultural skills such as flour milling and blacksmithing.

According to the Foundation, the buildings on the farm are believed to include the oldest surviving farming structures in Sonoma County still in their original rural setting.

The Santa Rosa Cultural Heritage Board has designated the site City Cultural Heritage Landmark #1.

Green, said, however, that despite the freeze, at least as far as the Learning Center is concerned, the “good news” is phase I of the project, rehabbing the farmhouse itself, is nearly complete.

That, he said, will allow the Foundation’s seven-member staff — which is taking a one-day-a-week furlough to keep expenses down — that has currently been housed in the Sonoma County Water Agency’s old headquarters in Santa Rosa for the past three years, to move in near the Laguna sometime this spring.

“We had a generous donation in the past two weeks that will allow the completion of that part,” said Green, who added the Foundation is looking for volunteer plumbers, electricians and sheetrock workers.

Total cost of Phase II, Green said, which includes completion of the interpretive center, is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$2 million.

In addition to the Learning Center, the Foundation’s ambitious Middle Reach Restoration Project involving some two miles of the Laguna’s east bank between Highway 12 and Occidental Road has also been impacted by the funding freeze.

The \$600,000 project aims to restore at least 30 acres of riparian forest as well as 12 acres of oak woodland to increase wildlife habitat as well as bank stability, filtration of runoff, and enhance stream shading, among other things.

The effort is part of a larger plan to restore significant portions of a 7.5-mile corridor preserved under conservation easements or as public lands in the Laguna.

Green said the Foundation has been working with a coalition of other conservation organizations across the state to try to “find a bridge funding mechanism to avoid staff layoffs or even closing down until the state can start selling bonds again which could be a long time.

“The state has made it clear that grant contracts are their lowest priority for starting to pay on again, so the public-interest groups the state relies on to implement its goals for wildlife habitat, offsetting carbon, developing recreational trails and improving water quality are left out in the cold,” he said.

Green said the group is also trying to figure out how the federal stimulus package might help conservation oriented non-profit projects, particularly those with public health and water quality goals, get or replace the lost or endangered state money.

“It’s a bit of a free-for-all right now,” Green added. “It’s hard to know exactly how the money will flow. Now that the (stimulus) bill has been finalized I’m sure that will become more clear soon.”

Meanwhile Lisa Hulette, Executive Director of the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District, said the freeze has impacted her outfit’s conservation work.

“The Gold Ridge RCD currently has over \$3,500,000 in projects that are in jeopardy,” she said on the coalition’s website, “Reseed California.”

“Currently frozen projects are restoration projects in Dutch Bill Slough, Salmon Creek, and other watersheds, and working with landowners to improve livestock and dairy land use practices in the Estero Americano and other coastal watersheds,” she added. “This doesn’t even include the proposals that have been ‘accepted’ by the state Coastal Conservancy, yet not executed.”

Other local non-profits whose projects have been affected include the Occidental Arts & Ecology Center and the Ocean Song Farm and Wilderness Center, whose \$639,000 coastal prairie enhancement feasibility study has been stopped, and staff laid off, as a result of the lingering freeze.