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Gateway to the Laguna

\$700,000 grant from Coastal Conservancy aids creation interpretive center at Stone Farm



Stuart Schroeder guides his Percheron draft horses Bonnie and Betsy as he spreads manure from a wagon at Stone Farm late last week. Schroeder works a small parcel at the farm with his 5-year-old horses. He grows organic potatoes, melons, gourds, peppers and tomatoes, and plans to add a hedge of hops. (KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat)

With the autumn sun ebbing in the west, two Percheron draft horses pulled a 1930s-era manure spreader across farmland on a rise above the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

It was a scene that schoolchildren might one day observe at the city of Santa Rosa's Stone Farm, the planned site of a center for visitors wishing to view the Laguna and to learn about ecology and the agricultural past.

"Part of our goal for this property is to demonstrate historic farming," said Mark Green, associate executive director for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. The hope is that people like Stuart Schroeder, who lives on the property and farms one small section with his draft horses, would be exhibitors.

The foundation has received a \$700,000 grant from the state Coastal Conservancy toward the construction of an interpretive center at Stone Farm. The 116-acre property, one of several large farms owned by the city along the Laguna, sits at Occidental and Sanford roads where the foundation will build the center.

The new grant comes as Sonoma County is preparing to begin construction next year on the first section of a trail system along the Laguna, one that would intersect the existing Joe Rodota Trail between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol.

The foundation also is working to complete restoration of the Stone Farm's two-story farmhouse, which dates back to the Civil War. The farmhouse, set off by four palm trees, will house the foundation's offices near the planned 5,000-square-foot interpretive center.

The trails and learning center will provide access to the Laguna, a waterway that extends from Cotati to the Russian River. The land offers one of the county's most abundant wildlife areas, though most of its wetlands have been turned into channels and the water quality has been degraded by human activity upstream. The watershed serves as the drainage for much of the central county, including the cities of Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Rohnert Park and Windsor.

County residents know of the Laguna, but "they don't know how to go out and experience it," said Dan Schurman, the foundation's executive director. The proposed learning center would bring "a focus onto the Laguna" for hikers, bird watchers, cyclists and school children, he said.

Completing the Stone Farm center and related projects will cost an estimated \$6 million. With the new grant, Green said, the foundation so far has raised \$2.3 million.

The county's first trail section, 1.8 miles along the Laguna from Highway 12 to Occidental Road, is expected to cost about \$1.3 million. It would be paid for by grants and proceeds from a quarter-cent sales tax county residents approved to set aside land for open space.

"The Laguna's an incredible resource," said Maria Cipriani, assistant general manager of the county's Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District.

Most of the Stone Farm pasture is still used by a nearby dairy. But farmer Schroeder works one small section there with his 5-year-old Percherons, Betsy and Bonnie. He grows organic potatoes, melons, gourds, peppers and tomatoes. And he has plans to plant a hedge of hops, one of the crops grown in earlier years.

The Laguna learning center should provide a focus on the horse-powered farming of days gone by, he said. "I'm looking forward to showing more people about it."

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STONE FARM VISITORS CENTER

The state Coastal Conservancy has awarded a \$700,000 grant to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation to help build an interpretive center at Stone Farm. The center is one of several projects. Here are some of them:

The 5,000-square-foot center will be built on a 116-acre site at Occidental and Sanford roads.

The foundation also is working to complete restoration of Stone Farm's two-story farmhouse. The farmhouse will house the foundation's offices near the interpretive center.

Construction of a trail system along the Laguna is set to begin next year. The first section, from Highway 12 to Occidental Road will cost about \$1.3 million.