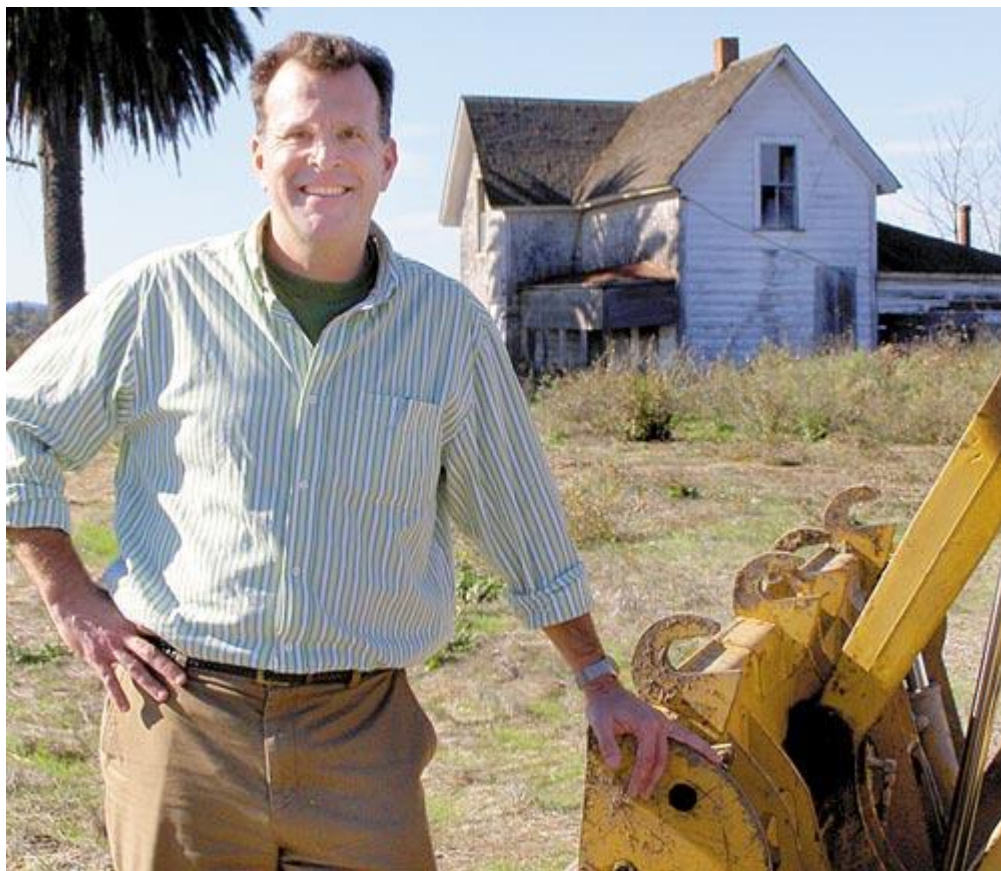




Laguna Learning Center breaks ground

Skilled volunteers sought for Stone Farmhouse repairs

by Patricia M. Roth - Sonoma West Staff Writer



DIG IT —Laguna Foundation's Dan Schurman watched the first dirt fly last week on the new learning center project. - Photo by Patricia M. Roth

Volunteers raced against the rain last week, working long days and late nights, using flashlights when necessary, to install a septic system at the site of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation's new learning center.

This necessary first step marked the ground-breaking of the Laguna Learning Center, an educational facility interpreting and celebrating the Laguna's rich environmental resources and Native American and agricultural history.

“Once we're here, the possibilities are endless,” said Dan Schurman, executive director of the foundation, as he watched tractors digging and moving dirt last week.

Schurman said the county is expected to sign off on the septic system on Wednesday (November 15), paving the way for construction to begin on the historic site overlooking the Laguna and the Santa Rosa Plain.

The Foundation is currently seeking tradesmen and women to help restore the farmhouse, the foundation's future headquarters, and then the barns, where modern, sustainable and historic agriculture will converge. They will also be soliciting in-kind donations of materials and labor for the interpretive center, which will include an exhibit hall, classroom, outdoor exhibits and trailhead for a system of trails. Later, community volunteers will be needed for landscaping and planting.

Throughout the process, they will continue their \$6 million fund-raising drive.

By next year, the Foundation's staff hopes to move into their offices, the farmhouse on the old Stone Farm. That farmhouse, likely the oldest surviving farmhouse in Sonoma County still in its original rural setting, will become a center of activity in the months ahead.

“Our first operation will be to raise the house off the foundation, then restore the foundation and, after the house has settled back down on new concrete, we'll do re-roofing and start on the interior. We're hoping to do that through the winter,” said Boardmember Guy Smith, who's managing renovation of the place with boardmember Richard Carlisle..

“We need concrete foundation contractors, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, sheet rockers, painters and landscapers,” said Smith. “If a person doesn't have a trade skill, the Laguna Foundation will accept cash donations as well.”

The first phase of construction will also include building a restroom facility, in the likeness of a watertower that was once on the property, scraping in an access road and landscaping around the house.

Smith said the Santa Rosa Rotary Club has volunteered to fix up the milk shed as a temporary office space. He appealed to other Rotary Clubs in the county “to see what kind of support they can give us on the prune barn.”

Smith thanked the businesses and individuals who helped install the septic system last week. “Many of these contacts I've worked with over the years. It's been a pleasure to revitalize those contacts with something so beneficial,” he said.

The workers include Carl Van Dyke and Associates, who installed the septic system; Dean Soiland, Blue Rock Quarry, Forestville; Bohan and Canelis, material suppliers, Austin Creek; Dave Branham, owner/operator of his own trucking company; Kadon

Trucking, Santa Rosa; Bruce Soloman Water Trucks; Mel Drew Septic Tanks, Pace Supply of Santa Rosa and Bruce Berry of Cazadero, who helped with the bracing of the large barn last year.

Smith said he is glad to serve on the board of directors and donate his time on this project. "My family has operated a ranch for over 50 years near the Laguna, and I have a very deep passion for the wildlife along the Laguna ... Each year, I have always enjoyed the migration of the waterfowl coming north in spring and then returning in the fall, and watching the hatchlings make their appearance every spring. The raccoons, possums, coyotes and even the skunks play a part in maintaining the system.

"My optimistic hope for the future is that the Laguna habitat will be enhanced considerably and that we hand off to future generations something even more precious than what we see right now," he said.

Susan Churchill, president of the Board of Directors, said the new learning center will help further the foundation's mission to preserve, restore and enhance the Laguna de Santa Rosa, as well as the flora and fauna that benefit from it being healthy.

A biologist and former owner of an environmental consulting company, Churchill first joined the foundation as a docent in the environmental education program after she heard about their work on the radio.

"Once you're out there, and with kids, you see how important the Laguna is to not only our generation but to future ages. It's critical that the public get to be more informed about the Laguna. Everybody you talk to, once they get there, they support what you are doing. It is important and it is so beautiful."

Churchill grew up fishing for crawdads in her back yard and building tree houses in the woods in upstate New York. "Here we have this fabulous natural environmental resource in our own county, in our backyard, and it deserves to be preserved," she said.

By creating a focal point for public attention on the Laguna, the Laguna Learning Center will contribute to its preservation, said Churchill. "To quote Gertrude Stein, 'there's a there there.' The Learning Center will be located right in the heart of the Laguna," she emphasized.

"Many people don't know what the Laguna de Santa Rosa is and its importance. With the learning center, they can come and experience it. Then when trails are built, they will be able to learn and get stimulated, then go down and walk or kayak and see an egret, and think of what it was like 10,000 years ago. It's going to be such an important asset to the whole community," said Churchill.

Because it's a wetlands, scientific data collected there will be accessible to anyone who is researching wetlands, no matter what city, state or country in which they are located.

The Laguna Learning Center is “bigger than Sonoma County. It has national or international importance, because wetlands are disappearing everywhere,” she explained..

Churchill recalled when past board president Dan Smith shared his vision to create a permanent place for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. “He said ‘we need to be in the Laguna, we need to have a place where we can attract everybody from all walks of life.’

“It was his vision to go to the Board of Utilities and convince them that this would be the best use of this unique place.”

In April of 2004, they agreed. “Now, everybody who gets involved with this project, from city checkers to county health officials, is excited about it. From the get-go it's been a collaboration between all these different parties,” Churchill said.