

El Nido Teen Center Building Project

There is an absence of programs and a lack of appropriate facilities in the Springs area to meet the needs of the at-risk youth and families who live there.

For the past nine years, El Nido Teen Center has been housed in an inadequate building. Although located in the Boyes Springs area, where almost all of our teens live, the building has required extensive renovation, painting, and repair to make it safer and somewhat more livable. Despite these improvements, undertaken at ENTC's expense, our effort is still confined to three rooms and one undersized office, all of which lack the privacy often required by its sensitive relationships with teens.

The Flowery Mentor Center is equally deprived. Its site lacks bathrooms, safe car access, adequate parking space, sidewalks, drainage, security fences, lighting, landscaping, and a sports court.

There is a shortage of meeting places for organizations which serve youth and families in the Springs, or which would like to undertake such efforts. The areas schools are already overused in meeting their own needs. The churches have limited space and many programs of their own that fill their meeting places. The recently renovated La Luz Center provides community groups with beautiful, comfortable, and free meeting rooms, but again their space is limited. Much enthusiasm has been generated among local nonprofits to have a community room at the Teen Center site, which would be available for meetings, special events, workshops, classes, etc.

Over the years, ENTC Board members have tentatively explored properties and buildings that might be suitable as a new home for the Teen Centers programs. Some were rejected because they were too far off the beaten path, some were too expensive, and others were not available for sale. But in any case, ENTC did not then have the funding resources it needed to seriously consider a move.

In the past year things have changed dramatically. A suitable property, with two lots, located just across the street from the current Teen Center site, and adjacent to the Flowery Mentor Center, was found and secured for ENTC. The Community Partnership for Youth (CPY), Phase II RFP, was released and offered substantial capital funds for after-school programs that specifically targeted at-risk youth, ENTC's specialty. The supervisors approved \$375,000 for construction of the building from the CPY, Phase II funding. CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) funding also approved by the Supervisors, will allow for the purchase of one lot (and fees) \$80,000. Donors have pledged \$70,000 to fund the purchase of the second lot. Outreach to the Redevelopment Agency about the project was very positive. The project is within the Sonoma Valley Redevelopment Project area, the Agency will do the frontage improvements along Highway 12, adding sidewalks and safety improvements as well as help insure that the project meets high accessibility standards. Art Fichtenberg, the project manager, is donating his time and energy for the first year, Garry Baker is donating his architectural expertise through the use permit process. An elevator (\$15,000) has also been acquired.

But even more extraordinary is the partnership that ENTC has created to support the building project. The partnering members are a diverse group and include ENTC, the Stand By Me

Mentoring Program, the Valley of the Moon Boys and Girls Club, the Sonoma Community Center, the Springs Unity Partnership, and La Luz. The Sonoma Springs Committee which will oversee the building project is an evolving group that includes the executive directors of all the partnering nonprofits, the partnering organizations Board members, community leaders, and people with experience in land development and project management. Even the school district is supportive of the project. More members and advisors will be added to ensure completion of the project. The combined experience of the individuals involved will ensure that the project is appropriately planned, implemented, and completed.

Target Audience : The hardest concept for people who do not live or work in the Springs area to understand how different it is from downtown Sonoma, which is known for its high property values, wineries, and a lack of ethnic diversity. Even within the Springs there are wealthy people living mansions and wealthy visitors to the areas elegant Sonoma Mission Inn. However, in the heart of the Springs area lives a high percentage of underserved and economically disadvantaged families and youth.

Those of us who work Springs youth are well-acquainted with their difficulties. Most are from very low-income families. Some are single-parent families. Others are struggling with drug and alcohol abuse, neglect, violence, and criminal behavior. Data from the free- or reduced-cost meal programs at El Verano and Flowery Schools prove that Springs families are at-risk. At Flowery in the school year 2002-2003, seventy percent of the students qualify for free- or reduced-cost meal programs. Sixty percent of the students are Latino and fifty-seven percent English learners. At El Verano School, where sixty-three percent qualify for free- or reduced-cost meal programs, sixty-six percent of the students are Latino and most are English learners. Ninety percent of ENTC members live in the Springs and surveys conducted in 2000 indicate that a large percentage of local teens are involved with drugs, alcohol, and unsafe sex. More services are required to meet these needs.

The Springs: Location, Location, Location : Flowery and El Verano Schools are located one-and-a-half miles apart. All of their students live in a three-mile radius. The Flowery Mentor Center is right next to the Flowery School. ENTC now resides across the street, but will be moving into a new building adjacent to the Mentor Center. La Luz Center, the Springs Resource Center, and Vineyard Workers Services are nearby.

The Valley of the Moon Boys and Girls Club is housed in Maxwell Farms Regional Park, one-and-a-half miles south on Highway 12. The Community Center is three miles from Flowery School, near the Plaza in the City of Sonoma.

Most of the adolescents who live in the Springs attend Sonoma Valley High School or Adele Harrison Middle School, which are three-and-a-half miles away. Others attend Altimira Middle School and the Gateway Program, which are one-and-a-half miles from Flowery. The Community School is three-miles away in downtown Sonoma.

Such distances may not seem great, but there is poor access along Highway 12 for pedestrians. Many families have inadequate or unreliable transportation. Bike theft is common and few teens use their bikes regularly. Bus transportation is marginal. Both school and public bus systems are

expensive. It can take an hour for a school bus to drive the three-and-a half miles to Flowery, and buses are not available for those wishing to attend after-school programs.

As a result, services available downtown are underutilized by families and youth who live just a few miles away. For example, even though the Community Center has generously offered free classes to ENTC members, few have the support or transportation to take advantage of this opportunity. Counselors stationed at SAY, the Community School, and Youth & Family Services at the Sonoma Police Department, have difficulty meeting regularly with youth and families who live in the Springs area, usually because of transportation difficulties. Springs parents do not usually attend meetings at the high school and intermediate schools.

Building Plan : This project concerns the two forty-foot lots which have been secured for El Nido Teen Center. The lots are due south of the Flowery Mentor Center, which sits on three forty-foot lots.

In Phase One, one of the two southerly lots will be developed for an approximately 2500-4000 square foot building to serve as El Nidos headquarters. The building will include a community room of approximately 600 square feet that will be available for meetings, classes, workshops, and special events by El Nidos partners and other organizations serving the Springs area.

The site development in Phase One will enhance the adjacent Flowery Mentor Center lots with a common driveway, shared parking, an outdoor sport court, landscaping, and restroom facilities.

In Phase Two, a building will be constructed on the southerly second lot to serve as a community center offering a permanent site for programs involving families and people of all ages in the Springs.

Youth Representation : Members of El Nido have dreamed of a permanent teen center site for years. In 1995, they talked of creating a Teen Town by converting a then run-down shopping center into a movie theater, youth-serving retail stores, and a new teen center. In 1998, during an ENTC retreat, teens and adults drew pictures of what they thought an ideal teen center should contain. The drawings were surprisingly similar. Many were of a free- standing two-story building with nice landscaping, an outdoor recreation area, and many smiling teen faces. More recently, the teen members, when asked for feedback on locating a site, have insisted that the new teen center be located on Highway 12, near the current site. The success of any teen center, they feel, depends on its accessibility to the underserved local youth in its neighborhood.

Right now there are eleven youths who are directly involved in the process of designing a teen center. They have visited “Chops” in Santa Rosa twice, and have had many discussions about what they want and don’t want in the buildings design. One of them, as part of his high-school senior project, is gathering ideas from teens and staff, and will design a teen center based on these suggestions. Teens will become more involved as the project process continues. We also want to involve them in fundraising for the new building. However, we want to take it slowly with the teens. Some will be very disappointed if the funding is not acquired. Others will no longer be teenagers or in the area when the Teen Center is completed.

Funding Plan : Is all this financially possible? Yes. Cost estimates for land, construction, and redevelopment (sidewalks, gutters, etc) total approximately \$800,000. Most of this amount can be met by funds currently available through Community Partnership for Youth, Phase II, administered by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, and through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) created by Federal housing and community development acts. The objectives of both programs are to provide support for partnership efforts such as ENTC is undertaking. Applications have been made to these agencies, and their responses should be known in May, 2003. Anything less than the required total will be met by money-raising efforts by the ENTC.