

Romberg eyes new eco-friendly education and visitor center

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The Romberg Tiburon Center for Environmental Studies is taking the first steps toward building an eco-friendly community education and visitor center at its Paradise Drive site.

By partnering with the Architecture at Zero design competition, Romberg is challenging students, architects, urban planners and engineers from all over the world to create a plan for the zero-net-energy center, which will feature classrooms, lecture space and demonstration aquariums.

The plan keeps with Romberg's new community outreach mission, according to Executive Director Karina Nielsen, and it will allow the San Francisco State University-owned marine biology lab and research center to welcome school groups and teachers on a regular basis.

"There has never been a more important time to engage people in the nature of science and the nature of the bay," Nielsen said. "We do this every year at our popular Discovery Day open house, but we want to do more. Our vision is to have a place where we can make Discovery Day happen every day."

The proposed education and visitor center will include two new buildings. The first is an 8,300-square-foot building that will be used by the general public and visiting school groups. The design will include space for interactive exhibits, a wet lab classroom that can accommodate multiple aquariums, including a 200-gallon touch tank, and a multipurpose room. It will also include a lunch room, outdoor picnic area, restrooms and a lecture theater.

The second building, a smaller 1,500 square feet, will house lockers, showers and equipment storage for sea-going research trips and visitor programs.

The plan, still in its early stages, is part of San Francisco State's larger master plan for the 53-acre Paradise Drive site. The university has promised \$600,000 to develop the master plan, Nielsen said, which will address what to do with many of the derelict buildings on site.

Those who enter the competition, sponsored by Pacific

Gas and Electric Co. and the American Institute of Architects, will be tasked with creating an overall site plan, as well as designing the two buildings in detail to ensure they are zero-net-energy, or that they produce at least as much energy as they use over a year.

"These structures are designed from the start to be energy efficient and offset the energy they consume through onsite renewable energy generation such as rooftop solar," the contest sponsors explained in a press release.

The design must also incorporate the possibility of 3-5 feet of sea-level rise due to global warming, contest organizers said.

The winning design, which must be submitted by January 2018, will earn a \$25,000 prize.

The Architecture at Zero competition was started seven years ago to help meet California's goal of making all new residential construction energy-neutral by 2020 and all new commercial construction energy-neutral by 2030. In previous years, contest entrants have been challenged to create zero-net-energy designs for a student-housing project at San Francisco State and for two development projects at Jack London Square in Oakland, among others.

Nielsen said the zero-net-energy aspect of the competition seemed fitting for Romberg, where scientists study the effect of climate change on the marine environment.

"We are acutely aware of the impact of climate change on sea level rise," she said. "We study this problem, and we want to demonstrate ways to mitigate the problem."

The new visitor center will support Romberg's blossoming mission as a community educator, Nielsen said.

Although it's mainly a marine biology research station, Romberg currently has two science educators who conduct teacher-training sessions and work with school groups from around the Bay Area. It also has volunteer docents who work with school groups and the public through the San Francisco Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve and Bay Shore Studies, both of which are based at Romberg.

At present, most of the teaching programs are held off-site at China Camp State Park in San Rafael and Richardson Bay Audubon Center and Sanctuary in Tiburon.

"We get a lot of requests (for visitors), but we don't really have the facilities to accept them. It's what the community wants, but (right now) we can't give it to them," Nielsen said.

She said the new visitor center would allow Romberg to consolidate classes from the different programs and host them under one roof.

Teaching staff at the center would also draw on the expertise of the doctorate-level scientists at the marine lab as well as students from San Francisco State's Graduate College of Education, she said. San Francisco State students could become involved through professional internships, she added.

While San Francisco State has committed funds to the development of the Romberg site's master plan, funding for the education and visitor center is not yet fully in place, Nielsen said. She has a number of ideas, she said, including applying for grants, charging program and admission fees and soliciting donations from the public.

"We'd consider developing a self-supporting nonprofit or perhaps a public-private partnership to run the science education center," she said.

Nielsen said the university is waiting to see what cost estimates the design contestants come up with before drawing up a budget for the project. The Romberg site has been used in the past as everything from a codfish-drying factory to a naval yard that manufactured anti-submarine nets to a reeling station for steel wire to be used in the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Its warehouses and outbuildings are mostly unusable, Nielsen said, because they are unsafe and aren't handicap accessible. As part of the master-plan process, a historic assessment team will eventually be hired to determine which buildings are historically significant.

"These buildings are old," she said. "Some might be ungraded but some will not be worth it."

Contributing writer Gretchen Lang of Belvedere covers the environment. She spent 15 years abroad writing for newspapers including the Boston Globe and the International Herald Tribune.