

Napa Valley Register

Saturday, August 21, 2010

Copia greenhouse and garden exhibits move to Connolly Ranch



Workers from Ag-Con Construction dismantle the plexiglass siding of the greenhouse in the former gardens of Copia in order to move it to Connolly Ranch.

A greenhouse that once nurtured tiny seeds at the former Copia property will soon be nurturing new life at Napa's Connolly Ranch.

Workers began dismantling the 1,440 square-foot greenhouse in the Copia gardens on Tuesday and moving it to the ranch. The structure will serve as both a greenhouse and classroom, providing welcome indoor space, Bob Pallas, executive director of Connolly Ranch, said.

In 2003, the California Department of Parks and Recreation granted Copia more than \$1 million for educational resources and exhibits including the greenhouse, a children's garden, community garden and promenade. After Copia filed for bankruptcy in November 2008, the greenhouse and exhibits lie unused, while the state hoped to reinstall them at another location.

Recently, the state and the Copia liquidating trust were able to reach an agreement to move the greenhouse to Connolly Ranch. As directed by the bankruptcy court, the trust paid \$75,000 toward the removal and reinstallation of the greenhouse.

"It's a win-win," to receive the greenhouse, Pallas said. "It allows us to extend our programs into the rainy season." Whenever bad weather looms, teachers often cancel trips to the ranch, he said. "Our existing greenhouse is tiny; it can only fit three kids at once." With the new 24- by 60-foot greenhouse, "We can fit 60 kids," rain or shine.

The greenhouse will be on the west side of the ranch, with access via a gate on Thompson Avenue. To prepare the site for the structure, the ground had to be leveled, a concrete pad poured, drainage installed and a parking spot created for people with disabilities.

As part of the agreement, Connolly Ranch will run Copia's former "Farm to Table" program, which fits the agricultural education the ranch already provides. The project includes more than just the greenhouse, Pallas said. "It's the entire children's garden program at Copia that moved," including a chicken coop, rabbit coop, all the self-guided tour signage and compost bins.

Pallas admitted he was a little unsure about accepting the greenhouse at first, saying, "There was some hesitation because we have such a limited staff at Connolly Ranch." Pallas plans to enlist volunteers to launch a credible greenhouse program. The director also hopes to reach out to new groups, including middle schools, the Master Gardener program and other organizations. "We would love to have people experienced with greenhouse gardening to contact us," he said.

While the dismantling of the greenhouse takes only three days, it will take a few weeks to reassemble the structure, said Ray Pound, president of Ag-Con Construction in San Jose. Ag-Con originally installed the Copia greenhouse in 2005, Pound said. The structure, which cost around \$100,000 new, is 16 feet high at its peak, and climate controlled by a computerized system. The walls are made of double-walled polycarbonate material.

"It's a pretty sophisticated greenhouse," Pound said. "You can grow just about anything in there because it's climate and light controlled."

New owner?

In other Copia news, there could be a new owner for the First Street property by this fall.

"We have been in negotiations with a group for a few weeks now," Jerry Pietroforte of Alvarez & Marsal Real Estate Advisory Services said. Copia bond insurer ACA Financial Guaranty Corporation hired the firm to sell the Copia property. "We expect those discussions will result in a sale of the property. We are aiming to close a deal by this fall," he said. Pietroforte could not provide any further information.