

Hitchcock Center for the Environment plans \$4 million home at Hampshire

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AMHERST - The Hitchcock Center for the Environment, a regional leader in nature education, is planning a new \$4 million energy-efficient building on the Hampshire College campus.

It would replace the Hitchcock Center's home since 1975 off South Pleasant Street, a drafty former carriage house that lacks adequate space for the expanding staff and programs, said executive director Julie Johnson.

"We recognize that green building is the wave of the future and our building is an energy guzzler," she said. "And we need to expand because we're sitting on top of each other now. We want to really step up and demonstrate what we teach and be leaders in energy efficiency."

The Hitchcock Center is looking at two to four possible sites on the Hampshire campus, Johnson said. It is hoping to identify the best site next spring and start a campaign to raise between \$3.5 million and \$4.5 million for construction, she said. The Hitchcock Center expects to lease the land from Hampshire at below-market rates and forge closer links with the college but still remain independent, she said.

After the site is chosen, the goal is to move into the new building in three to five years, Johnson said.

Hampshire College currently shares its sprawling South Amherst campus with the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and the National Yiddish Book Center, both of which bought the property their buildings sit on. The Hitchcock Center project represents another non-traditional partnership for the college.

"The Hitchcock Center shares with Hampshire College a strong commitment to innovative, interdisciplinary education and sustainability," said President Jonathan Lash in a statement. "Educating environmentally literate citizens of all ages is an important component of meeting the challenges of our rapidly changing world."

Center turning 50

The Hitchcock Center, named for Edward Hitchcock, the geologist and Amherst College president, will mark its 50th anniversary next summer. Its building, near the Common School and Larch Hill Conservation Area, is owned by the town of Amherst but the center pays no rent.

It built a classroom as an addition to the main building in the 1980s, and in the late 1990s renovated an adjacent space for a second classroom. The center has a library with books on nature writing, sustainability, plants, birds and amphibians. There are topographical maps and posters with messages such as "The ABCs of Living Green" on the walls, and there are stuffed birds and mammals in one classroom.

The center brings in public school students on field trips from all over western Massachusetts and its educators go out to classrooms, giving an estimated 4,500 children a year an opportunity for hands-on science and nature programs, Johnson said. It runs vacation and summer camps, trains teachers in environmental education, and hosts nature programs for the public. Programs in the next two months will address mammal tracking, honeybees, native perennials and "The Secret Life of Black-Capped Chickadees."

Center growing

Since Johnson became director 10 years ago, the annual budget has risen from \$200,000 to \$350,000, the staff has grown from seven to 11, and the number of programs has doubled, she said. The current building has 4,500 square feet, and she is hoping the new one will have between 6,500 and 7,500.

This growth reflects a growing interest in environmental education, Johnson said.

"There's a general awareness that there are significant environmental problems we're facing in society today, and there is a thirst for understanding how to address these problems and learn more about how we can change our habits to live more harmoniously with nature," Johnson said.

At the same time, the growth of personal computers has reduced the amount of time children spend outside, she said.

"There are studies showing kids don't understand what's out there in the woods, don't want to get their hands dirty and tend to reject going outside," Johnson said. "We want kids to love going outside and become environmental stewards. We're trying to spark their imagination and creative thought and teach problem-solving skills."

The center's goal for the new building is to be self-sufficient in energy use, or at least meet the highest standards of green construction, she said. This could include thick walls, solar electric panels and geothermal energy, but the center hopes to have systems that are simple and can be used as teaching tools, she said.

Johnson and members of the center's board of directors have visited 10 to 12 sites, including the Mass. Audubon Society building in Wellfleet and the Harris Center for Conservation Education in Hancock, N.H., she said. "We've learned a lot about what not to do, such as installing highly mechanical systems," she said.

Johnson said she has also learned about fundraising from Carol Johnson and Cheryl Zoll, executive directors of the Amherst Cinema and the Amherst Survival Center, which have run successful capital campaigns for new buildings. A consultant has done interviews with donors and run forums with constituent groups and concluded that the fundraising goal is reachable, she said.

"I'm excited to be working with Hampshire College to find a suitable site and move this along," said Jaana Cutson, president of the center's board of directors.

Longtime connection

The Hitchcock Center has long had a relationship with Hampshire College. Former President Gregory Prince served on its advisory council, Hampshire once provided space for the summer camp, and faculty and staff members have spoken about their field of expertise at the center, Johnson said.

There will be opportunities for future cooperation when the center relocates to the Hampshire campus, she said. There could be connections with students in the natural sciences, sustainability, early childhood and education, as well as internships, teacher training and certification programs, she said.

In addition, the Hampshire campus includes woodlands, forests, wetlands, vernal pools, streams and ponds, providing an opportunity for outdoor classrooms, she said.

Environmental education will only become more important, Johnson said.

"One of the most important 21st-century concerns is how we're going to survive as a species, given what we're doing currently," she said. "This is one of the most important aspects of what we need to be thinking about: How we are going to live in harmony with nature and not against it. We need to develop environmental literacy in citizens starting at an early age. We want to be a center for hope and possibility and create excitement about our future."

Caption: Julie Johnson, executive director of the Hitchcock Center for the Environment, and Hampshire College President Jonathan Lash discuss plans for the center to move to the college campus in Amherst.

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