
Case Study: The EcoCenter at Heron's Head Park in San Francisco Demonstrating community sustainability and revitalization

Since its founding in 1998, Literacy for Environmental Justice (LEJ) has actively worked with community leaders, educators, and youth to address the significant environmental and public health concerns of the Bayview Hunters Point community, located in San Francisco's southeastern corner. LEJ provides free environmental education programs to classroom and youth groups at Heron's Head Park, a 24-acre park with eight acres of restored wetlands in Bayview Hunters Point. The California State Water Resource Control Board's Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) program is helping improve this site through an award of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding, furthering LEJ's educational mission while reducing the environmental footprint of an important community space.

On Earth Day of 2010, LEJ opened its new EcoCenter at Heron's Head Park (see picture below). Funded in part by \$350,160 in ARRA CWSRF funds and located at the former site of an abandoned brownfield, the EcoCenter will serve as a learning center for community youth about energy efficiency, waste management, water conservation, green infrastructure and green building. This project had originally been awarded state grant funding, but these grant funds became unavailable due to the recession, putting the project on hold for eight months. The availability of CWSRF ARRA funding allowed LEJ to move forward and complete this innovative project. While the ARRA funds are in the form of a loan, the entire loan principal has been forgiven.

The 1,500 square foot facility is powered by solar energy. The EcoCenter also treats its own wastewater using constructed wetlands, biological treatment, and ultraviolet sterilization lamps. In addition, it features a green roof and native landscaping, which conserve water and prevent stormwater runoff. ARRA money funded the construction of the green roof, rainwater catchments, native landscaping, and a constructed wetland located inside the building to treat wastewater. ARRA funds also went towards developing educational signage and outreach materials.



LEJ hopes that the EcoCenter will serve as an example of sustainability for the rest of the community. A sustainable project involves more than just reducing waste, pollution, and energy; it requires holistic thinking about how a project fits into its social, economic, and physical setting. Every feature of the EcoCenter was designed to be a teaching tool for sustainability and green building design. It exemplifies principles of community sustainability and livability by emphasizing the interconnection of social, economic, and environmental issues as they relate to the history of the Bayview Hunters Point community.

Bayview Hunters Point was once a bustling hub of industrial activity. Employment and housing opportunities expanded significantly in the area during World War II when the U.S. Navy acquired the shipyards at Hunters Point and constructed new dry docks, industrial shops, and warehouses to meet demand for warships in the Pacific. The decommissioning of the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard in 1974 left many residents unemployed and impoverished with no new employment opportunities nearby. Increasing suburbanization and freeway construction further isolated the community from the rest of the city. As living conditions in the area worsened, it became nearly impossible to attract private investment to this part of San Francisco.

Today, the Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood is home to more than 33,000 people, a significant portion of which are racial or ethnic minorities. Approximately 30 percent of the residents are below the age of 21 – a percentage that is higher than any other part of the city. In 2001, nearly 22 percent of the residents were below the poverty line and unemployment was well above average. Additionally, the community has dozens of toxic waste sites, including a 500-acre Superfund site, and has the highest water and air pollution emissions in the city. Rates of breast and cervical cancer, congestive heart failure, hypertension, diabetes, emphysema, and asthma are significantly higher in Bayview Hunters Point than in other parts of the San Francisco Bay Area.

However, there is reason for hope for renewal in the Bayview Hunters Point. The EcoCenter at Heron's Head Park is consistent with the land use plans for the area, which aim to achieve a balance of residential, commercial, and open space uses; stimulate development in underused and declining areas; and increase pedestrian-oriented neighborhood commercial and social activities, among others. The EcoCenter helps to further establish Heron's Head Park as an open space for residents to gather and socialize while learning about local plants and wildlife and the importance of sustainability. It demonstrates economic development potential by using green technology and design for efficient water, energy, and waste management.

It is fitting that the views from the EcoCenter include that of a recently decommissioned power plant, the toxic former naval shipyard, and the dilapidated Hunters View public housing complex. They are all part of the largest redevelopment project in the city's history, which will invest more than \$2 billion of public and private capital for public infrastructure and transit, open space, mixed-income housing, and new commercial space to attract "greentech" businesses and jobs to the area. In 2007, the T-Third Street Muni Metro line opened and brought much-needed public transportation to Bayview Hunters Point, helping to reintegrate the community with the rest of the city and promote residential and commercial development in the area. The ongoing redevelopment project is striving for at least LEED for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) Gold certification and will include solar power arrays, on-site stormwater management techniques, restoration of waterfront habitat, and use of advanced technologies for energy and water efficiency and waste management.

This ARRA CWSRF-funded project demonstrates the possibilities for sustainable redevelopment of this distressed area. The EcoCenter’s sustainable physical attributes are complemented by the educational opportunities LEJ offers community youth as it works to instill a sense of pride in the community and environment. The EcoCenter at Heron’s Head Park received an EPA 2010 Environmental Justice Award. Project Manager Laurie Schoeman said that “having the ability to show youth an actual green roof and rainwater cistern is ten times more powerful than describing the systems or reading about the systems online – or even going to upscale communities to visit these systems. We have been able to bring cutting edge green building designs to a community that is in most need for environmental remediation.”

For more information please contact the California Clean Water State Revolving Fund Program
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