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Editorial: Green light for Hitchcock

By *Daily Hampshire Gazette*
Created 01/02/2012 - 6:00am

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When the Hitchcock Center for the Environment asked around about its future, it found its supporters are bullish. They want the nonprofit Amherst organization, which works with an estimated 4,500 public school students a year, to step up and help us all here in the Valley live in sync with natural resources.

To make room for that future, the center plans a move and a building project that, in one stroke, will put it in a new alliance with Hampshire College and, through construction of an energy-efficient home, allow it to stand with its environmental principles.

It will take time, though. The 50-year-old organization, named for a former Amherst College president and geologist, will soon start a campaign to raise the \$3.5 million to \$4.5 million it will need to replace its current quarters in a drafty former carriage house the town owns with a new home on the Hampshire campus.

Julie Johnson has doubled the number of programs the center runs in the decade she has served as its executive director, a time that saw its staff grow from seven to 11 employees. She believes, for good reason, that the demand - and social need - for environmental education programs will continue to grow. She dreams of training a new generation of "environmental stewards," helping to equip them with a deeper consciousness and new problem-solving tools.

Johnson is articulate on the subject, telling the Gazette's Nick Grabbe, "One of the most important 21st-century concerns is how we're going to survive as a species, given what we're doing currently. 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."

It appears that Johnson and the center's board have done their homework. We think they will make a compelling case for public support in their capital campaign.

One of their smartest early moves, in our view, is forging a partnership with Hampshire and its new president, Jonathan Lash.

The two organizations, though they will retain their independence, will create joint programs that advance their separate educational goals.

Hitchcock will surely seek to explore forest and wetlands ecosystems that lie across Hampshire's sprawling campus.

Upon his arrival this year, Lash committed himself to investing in environmental issues at Hampshire, bringing, as he does, a long involvement with this cause through the World Resources Institute, which he had led since 1993.

By taking the Hitchcock center under its wing, and making a space available for lease at below-market rates, Hampshire can help bring Johnson's storied program to a new stage.

A lot has to happen before then, but this is an exciting time for Hitchcock and a promising one for all of the Valley schools that rely on the center's staff to help raise their students' environmental awareness through field trips and summer and vacation camps.

The decision to green-light growth for Hitchcock will also create new opportunities for all Valley residents to better understand our natural places.

In just the next few months, people who engage with Hitchcock programs will learn how to track mammals in winter, the ways of native perennials and even "The Secret Life of Black-Capped Chickadees."

The secret of the Hitchcock center itself is already out - and when it settles into a larger and more energy-efficient home in South Amherst, it will have earned a big new place on the map.

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