

Sierra Friends Center/Woolman's report to College Park Quarterly Meeting – October 2023

Dear Friends,

I stand before you knowing that most of you have heard the news that this land which we have loved and stewarded for the past 60 years is for sale. We are working toward an agreement with the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe, via its tribally-guided non-profit organization, CHIRP (California Heritage Indigenous Research Project). Our talks are productive and full of good will on both sides. To date we have signed a Letter of Intent. The next step is a Purchase Agreement, which will be negotiated.

You may wonder how we got to this point, I just looked at last year's report. It was so hopeful -full of the energy of a new Executive Director. Programs were being launched and there was a sense of purpose and forward motion but if you look carefully at the financial information, you will see that we were spending more that we were bringing in. We thought that as we built up our programs we would attract new donors, inspire our faithful donors, and be successful in grant writing. We knew it was a challenge but we believed that we could do it.

Unfortunately, that isn't what happened. I can summarize it for this report and give more details during the interest group. As you know, due to the fire and the pandemic we were closed for two years. When we reopened, we were in start-up mode. Our campers had either aged out or had found new ways to spend their summers, schools were reeling from the effects of the pandemic and couldn't or didn't commit to sending students. Costs sky-rocketed, one example is that our fire insurance rates tripled. The rules for safety changed, meaning that we had to be able to evacuate every person from the campus in the case of an emergency all at the same time, forcing us to rent vans during camp and when school groups were on campus for Outdoor School. And our

cabins and bath house had burned so we raised the money to build the tent cabins.

Then there was the financial crisis that gripped the nation with banks failing, the stock market crashing, and inflation. Donors weren't feeling able to be as generous. Both our fall and winter appeals failed to bring in the expected donations. We were successful in acquiring some grants but not nearly enough to cover the reduction in donations and the rising costs.

By June we realized that the pace that we were using our savings was not sustainable. We wrote an appeal to help us make it through the summer. We didn't want to leave our campers and their families as well as our newly hired camp staff in the lurch. Fortunately, while the response was limited, 7 donors, some were very generous and we were able to offer the full 5 weeks of camp. From all accounts, it was yet again a wonderful Woolman experience and campers left happy and wanting to come back.

I hope that you realize whether you are a donor, a former student, an emotional supporter, or even a witness that Woolman has profoundly impacted peoples' lives. We had the 60th anniversary party here the last weekend of September. It was beautiful to hear the stories shared by those who were part of this adventure from the beginning through the semester program, and camp. Memories flowed from alumni, staff, faculty and administrators as well as former board members. Woolman mattered!

The evening event included a book talk with Lisa Frankel and Catherine Lenox regarding their new book, *The Woolman Way: A History of John Woolman School*. Among many things we learned that Woolman always had an Achilles heel. It never had the financial resources to create stability. Many people gave of their considerable talents and

time but that foundational reality never changed. In some ways it magnified as the current board dealt with aging infrastructure and jerry-rigged fixes.

Some people are asking why we didn't offer the land to a Quaker group. You may remember that there were a number of people from this Quarter and beyond who were convinced that we should re-matriate the land after the fire. Those of us on the Board did not agree. The campus was a mess, with toxic burn piles scattered in various locations. Mel's Pond was damaged and empty, houses that had survived, including the Arbor House were red tagged. It was not a gift it was a burden. Plus, the insurance money would not have followed the sale.

But the idea didn't die. We heard the desire and we began working to cultivate a relationship with the tribe. (I know that Grass Valley Friends Meeting has been very deliberate in their efforts to learn and understand the history and story of the Nisenan people.). We started exploring ways to grant a cultural easement so that important artifacts found after the fire were accessible to the tribe. We explored ways we could work together.

As we began to come to terms with our financial reality, we did some deep soul searching. We came to consensus that the one thing we could still do was to use this resource for righting the injustices done to the local indigenous tribe on the land now called Sierra Friends Center beginning about 180 years ago with the local gold rush.

For us, this decision honors John Woolman; the founders, students and staff of John Woolman School; Friends; and Quakerism. We also honor our educational mission toward peace, justice, and environmental sustainability. The significant loss of Woolman at Sierra Friends Center is balanced by the benefit of passing a small piece of Nevada County land illegally taken in the past to the descendants of those people. The

Woolman Board sees this path as fulfilling the higher purpose that is being called for and may be within our power to make happen. I want you to know that we did not rush into this willy-nilly. Our committees studied many options and consulted with various experts: non-profit, real estate, and insurance lawyers, and financial advisers, most of whom were willing to share their expertise pro bono.

We did hire a real estate agent because this is a complex sale. He is taking a very reduced commission. But before hiring him, we considered three additional agents, asking them for their experience, their recommendations, how they would approach marketing the property, and what they thought it would bring. All of them told us that this could be a long process, some thought 2 or more years. They reminded us that this isn't a typical property and that the market for this kind of property is weak.

We hired Terry Hundemer who has a great deal of experience in the county and in selling large properties throughout the west. He shares similar values in that he is the former President of the Bear Yuba Land Trust Board.

People are asking why we are not doing a true land back, just give it back. Others are critical that we are not asking full market price. We made the decision based on the fact that while we did pay back almost all of our debts after the fire, there was one loan that the lender didn't mind waiting to be paid back. There is a second loan that we took out after COVID started before the fire, when we were still hoping that COVID might be short-lived. The Small Business Administration made loans available to small businesses, non-profits, etc. as part of the COVID relief effort. We took a loan at a very low interest rate that would be amortized over 30 years. We still owe that money plus we are now existing on a friendly loan that we had to take out in August. We hope that the sale will finalize before we have to try and find another

loan. We will repay the loans from the sale of the land. Please remember that until the sale is finalized, we have to continue to pay our bills; our one remaining staff person, who hires contractors to do fire abatement, mowing, maintenance, fire insurance, and utilities. This is not an inexpensive property to maintain.

Decisions about any remaining funds following a sale and the fulfillment of our liabilities are still to be determined.

What's next? We are expecting a final Purchase Agreement to be signed on or before November 1, 2023. We hope to finalize the sale by March 2024.

I hope that this report covers the most important issues regarding our decision to sell the land. Our decision to let go of the property was not an easy one or one that was taken lightly. We regret that others view our decisions as cold-hearted, since we have made them with clear thinking and hearts full of love.

There is a FAQ sheet and a financial statement.