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Coldharbour seeks greater presence in community

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Long-term vision includes visitors center and museum

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In 2024, Coldharbour Institute, the Gunnison Valley’s outdoor “learning laboratory,”

is planning for a new visitor center, museum and more education classes than ever before. The goal, according to board members, is to cement Coldharbour as a gathering space for all in the community, not just researchers.

The nonprofit Coldharbour Institute welcomes students, professionals and locals for educational programming and research on its 340-acre ranch just seven miles east of Gunnison. Most of the land is under a restrictive conservation easement and welcomes families of mule deer, elk and waterfowl each year.

This year, the five-person board plans to hire more staff, expand partnerships with local land management and wildlife agencies and loop in local high schoolers for paid work opportunities. The board is also preparing for a multi-million dollar capital campaign, meant to support its long-term vision for the institute.

This includes turning the historic homestead into a visitor center and museum, with office space. As of now, the amount of the capital campaign is not final and the board has yet to approve these goals, contained in its strategic plan.

“We want to have a visitor center where folks coming in from the Front Range or from our community can go and learn about the incredible history of our valley,” said the institute’s Interim Executive Director Hannah Schaefer Tibbett.

Through a partnership with Western Colorado University, Coldharbour has long offered students the chance to do research on local wildlife populations, build beaver dams and even catalog the tiny macroinvertebrate species found in Tomichi Creek. While Western’s fellows have worked on the property for years, the board wants to welcome the younger generation.

Its applied sustainability program, which provides educational programs for children and adults, will add the “youth regenerative corps.” This is a new internship program for high school students in which they’ll get paid and receive class credit for work with nonprofits and local governments. The goal is to have a pilot program by this fall, Tibbett said.

The institute plans to bolster its solar panel program by hiring a paid staff member to increase outreach to the Gunnison Valley. That program collects, tests and installs used solar panels on low-income homes in Gunnison County. The board plans to help the Gunnison Country Food Pantry and a mobile home park in the

City of Gunnison install solar panels.

The institute has offered regenerative agriculture classes to farmers and ranchers for a few years. This includes financial planning and land management. In 2024, Coldharbour plans to contract with more accredited teachers, increase course offerings and partner with more universities on the Front Range. There's a fee to take the course, but Coldharbour has offered scholarships in the past.

The organization hopes to use the money from the capital campaign to renovate the ranch's historic homestead into a museum, classrooms and visitors center. Members are looking to designate parts of the building, built in 1906, with the Colorado State Register of Historic Properties, which would open up more grant opportunities.

Tibbett hopes the new space will facilitate teaching students from the Gunnison Watershed School District about water ecology. They would start in a classroom, but soon put on waders and wander out to the Tomichi or Cochetopa creeks and see and feel the water for themselves, she said. Classrooms would provide research space for the institute's Western fellows and maybe be available for rent to the public.

"This could potentially be not only a learning classroom, but also a place where people can come to enjoy and reconnect with land," said board member Rachel Sabbato.

One of the institute's "biggest" pushes in 2024 is to work with Mountain Roots Food Project to fundraise for a new water well on the east side of the ranch that would not only support its farming operations, but potentially serve future buildings, Tibbett said. Mountain Roots rents about an acre of land from Coldharbour to grow the many vegetables that locals receive in their CSA box each year.

These expansive goals are meant to capture the goal of longtime locals Butch and Judy Clark of seeing the ranch preserved to benefit the community in perpetuity, offering a space for locals to gather and play outdoors. The Clarks donated the 340-acre ranch in 2015. Board members also imagine that Coldharbour might offer a trail network in the future, to create more ways for the public to use and

enjoy the open lands.

“[Butch] was always willing to learn and introduce new ideas. His generosity will be a legacy that reaches generations,” Sabato said. “Hopefully, through the ranch, we can continue to spread that ripple effect into food systems and building techniques, and general care and regenerative practices for the land.”

The board will review these goals before potential approval at its February meeting.

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