

Growing dome to teach South Shore students where produce comes from



Sierra Houses' growing domes will be much like the Truckee dome. Photos/Provided

Publisher's note: *This is one in a random series of stories about growing vegetables in South Lake Tahoe.*

By Kathryn Reed

Students at Sierra House Elementary School are about to get two nontraditional classrooms. They are going to be full of dirt – and ideally a lot of edible plants.

Parents and community members for some time have been working on bringing a growing dome to the South Shore campus. They are on track to have two domes installed by October.

Domes are a four-season geodesic greenhouse structure that use a fish pond and passive solar design to heat itself.

The original plan was one dome, 28-feet in diameter that would be 600-square-feet. Now the plan is two domes, each 18-feet in diameter for a total space of about 500-square-feet. They will lose a little space this way, but gain more, too, in terms of teaching possibilities. Different crops and growing methods could be taught with two domes.

The smaller dome comes with fewer restrictions when it comes to permitting. Lake Tahoe Unified School District and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency still need to have final approval, but school board members told the group at a May meeting to carry on with the two-dome idea.

“The main goal of having a dome is for kids to see food growing year-round,” parent Rebecca Bryson told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It might mean a salad bar is created in the school cafeteria using all ingredients from the dome, or a veggie side dish is served from dome-grown produce. A lemon tree may be part of the dome and then kids could see what it’s like to have fresh squeezed lemons on a variety of things.

“We really envision during recess kids will go in there. We want it not just for instruction,” Bryson said. She expects kids will want to see how things have changed, to touch plants and explore on their own.

And the goal is not to limit it to Sierra House kids, but have other schools come for regular visits. Instructors will be teachers and parents.

This project is a collaboration between Sierra House PTA, Small World Parents Network, Lake Tahoe Sustainability Collaborative and the Truckee Dome Raising Project.

Truckee has had a dome for a couple years, but on private property. However, schoolchildren are there regularly. The South Shore contingency made another trip to Truckee this month to get more insight. Truckee's dome at 36-square-feet is twice as big as one of Sierra House's domes.

While the dome will be on district property, taxpayer money is not going into this. So far the group has raised \$85,330 of the estimated \$120,000 that is believed to be needed.

Part of that money is from a grant Gardens 4 A Healthy Tahoe secured through the General Mills Foundation. The \$20,000 awarded locally is going toward the domes and the South Lake Tahoe Family Resource Center's garden.

Once these domes are erected, the organizers would like to find a way for domes to be the norm throughout Lake Tahoe Unified. If this happens, then there is the possibility through AmeriCorps to have someone full time overseeing the domes.

Nutrition has been a growing quest of parents. They have been working with Kathy Martinez, the district's nutrition coordinator, to create parent-led nutrition classes. Bryson said they've found kids who've never eaten celery before or didn't know bell peppers could be orange. They also find that students will taste unusual produce in a classroom, but toss the same thing in the garbage in the cafeteria.

That is one way the dome may help – making different food fun, not scary and gross.

But not all of the food being wasted at the schools is ending up at a landfill. Sierra House began a composting program about 1½ years ago, Bijou and the magnet school started last fall, and Tahoe Valley will have one next school year.

At Bijou, the garbage had to be picked up every three business days. With composting, the garbage truck now comes about every

10 days. For health code reasons, compost is picked up weekly.

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Notes:

- For more info about the dome project, email TahoeDomes@gmail.com.
- To donate to the cause, go online or write a check to LTUSD: SHGD and drop it off at the school or district office.