

NEWS > ENVIRONMENT • News

Yosemite National Park to build new \$10 million visitor center

Groundbreaking on “welcome center” in Yosemite Valley expected by this fall



A artist's rendering of the planned plaza and new Welcome Center proposed for Yosemite Valley. Yosemite Falls is visible in the background. The Welcome Center will be located in a refurbished building that formerly housed the Sport Shop in eastern Yosemite Village. (Courtesy of Yosemite Conservancy / RHAA Landscape Architects)

By **PAUL ROGERS** | progers@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: April 14, 2021 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: April 14, 2021 at 6:13 a.m.

In a typical year, more than 4.5 million people visit Yosemite National Park, many of them first-time visitors from other states and countries who are looking to find their bearings and figure out how best to enjoy the breathtaking scenery of one of America's most storied landmarks.



Now, park officials and a leading Bay Area environmental group are working to make their experience a little easier by building a new \$10.4 million visitor center in the heart of Yosemite Valley.

Construction is planned to begin this fall, with the new facility expected to open by the end of 2022 or early 2023.

"This is going to help people when they arrive in Yosemite Valley instantly get the guidance they need to have a great time," said Frank Dean, president of the Yosemite Conservancy, a nonprofit group based in San Francisco that has agreed to pay half the costs. "There's an old quote from a National Park Service deputy director who once said his advice to the visiting public is 'have a good time, don't fall down and learn something.' That's what we hope the new welcome center will deliver."

Yosemite's first visitor center, a rustic stone building, was built in 1925 in the middle of Yosemite Village. The current visitor center was built next door in 1966. The original building became the park's museum, which today features Native American artifacts, paintings and photography exhibits.

For decades, people could drive up and park outside both, then walk in, talk to rangers, ask questions about hikes, camping or other issues, then pick up maps and learn about the geology, plants, animals and human history of the famed 748,000-acre park.

But in the 1970s, when the park put in a shuttle bus system to deal with crowds and reduce traffic, those parking spaces were removed. Now, it's a half-mile walk from the main Yosemite Valley parking lot, tucked away amid groves of trees, shops, employee housing and park offices.

"Sometimes people can't find it. They wander around," said Scott Gediman, a spokesman for Yosemite National Park. "People ask me all the time when I'm out walking 'where's the visitor center?'"

Under the plans, the current visitor center, museum and theater — which are temporarily closed due to the COVID pandemic — will remain open. But the current visitor center will become more of an education center, perhaps combined with the museum, when the new one opens, Dean said.

The new welcome center will be located adjacent to the Village Store, in a 3,000-square foot building that formerly housed the Yosemite Village Sport Shop, much closer to the main parking area.

As part of the project, an outdoor plaza also will be built there, with new restrooms, paths and signs. The welcome center will feature rangers answering questions, and will offer information kiosks, interactive touchscreens, maps, guidebooks and other information about trails, hikes, safety and other tips for park visitors, Gediman said.

"People will be able to go in and say, I've got 5 hours or 6 hours," Gediman said. "They can get oriented. They can choose what they want to do. The ranger can ask if kids want to go through the junior ranger program. Visitor centers are also important for safety information, information about high water in the rivers, bears, things like that."



Since 1988, [the Yosemite Conservancy](#) has donated roughly \$140 million to Yosemite National Park. The money has paid for major upgrades to facilities around Lower Yosemite Falls, Glacier Point, Tunnel View, Olmstead Point, Bridalveil Fall and other locations. One of the conservancy's major projects, helping spearhead a \$40 million renovation of the trails and facilities at Mariposa Grove, the giant sequoia grove on Yosemite's southern edges, opened in 2018.

This year, the conservancy, which is funded through private donations, will spend \$11.5 million in the park.

Other than the new welcome center, its 2021 projects include:

- Scientific research investigating why giant sequoias and sugar pines are dying at unprecedented rates across the Sierra Nevada.
- Restoration at Ackerson Meadow and Lower Cathedral Meadow.
- Planting California black oak trees in Yosemite Valley.
- Researching and sharing stories of African Americans who helped shape Yosemite dating back to the 1800s, along with an event and video celebrating the legacy of early 20th-century Japanese American artist and UC instructor Chiura Obata, who produced renowned prints and paintings of Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada during his life from 1885 to 1975.
- Scientific research studying and protecting numerous wildlife species in the park and the Sierra Nevada, including Yosemite toads, Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep, Sierra Nevada red foxes, peregrine falcons and an endangered population of Pacific fishers.

"The Yosemite Conservancy helps us add a margin of excellence to do things at a higher levels — better exhibits, better facilities — to help us add to the quality of the experience," Gediman said.

95389, Yosemite Village, Yosemite...

[Report an error](#)

[Policies and Standards](#)

[Contact Us](#)

