



Sonoma Mission 200

Staff and Volunteer Stakeholder Meeting
Sonoma State Historic Park, Bay Area District

Meeting Summary

March 10, 2022



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Introduction

This report summarizes an interactive meeting with State Park staff and volunteers of Sonoma and Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park. The meeting was held on March 10, 2022 in the Sonoma Barracks at Sonoma State Historic Park and was attended by 30 individuals.

Project Overview

As the Bay Area District begins planning the commemoration of the Sonoma Mission anniversary, the voices and perspectives of the community will be crucial in identifying appropriate, meaningful, and impactful ways to reflect on the past 200 years and to shape the future of interpretation at Sonoma State Historic Park. The Sonoma Mission 200 Project is a multi-phase project that will gather community input, develop a commemoration plan and provide event management. The first phase begins with formal Tribal government consultations, community engagement with staff, volunteers, and stakeholders, and an online public meeting. The second phase includes plan implementation and commemoration activities. The final phase will yield a written update to the Sonoma State Historic Park interpretation and education programming.

The Sonoma Mission 200 project is part of a larger effort within State Parks' Reexamining Our Past Initiative. Among its goals, the initiative seeks to address interpretive programs and exhibits in California's State Park System that fall short of fully contextualizing the state's history. The initiative was started in 2020 when State Parks joined with other California State Agencies to redress discriminatory names within the state park and transportation systems. This followed the national conversation about racist public memorials in 2019, as well as Governor

Newsom's formal apology to Native Americans and the creation of the California Truth and Healing Council that same year.

Meeting Format

The meeting began with opening remarks from Bay Area District Superintendent Maria Mowrey, Interpretation & Education Program Manager Karen Barrett, and Historian III/Cultural Resources Program Manager Noah Stewart. An overview of the Sonoma Mission 200 Project was shared as was the objective of the meeting: to collect honest input and ideas from staff and volunteers. Project consultant, Dana Shew of the Anthropological Studies Center was introduced and served as the meeting facilitator. Dana provided participants with an overview of the meeting format and instructions for how to engage and submit comments. A team of students and staff from the Anthropological Studies Center and Sonoma State University assisted during the meeting, providing additional guidance and instruction as needed throughout the meeting. Having the staff and volunteer meeting staffed by outside facilitators was purposely intended to encourage candid feedback.

Participants were asked to visit five stations, each of which asked for feedback on a different topic. Attendees were able to anonymously share their ideas on post-it notes, through conversation with meeting facilitators, and by voting for specific ideas being presented. The results of the one-hour, interactive meeting are summarized below, organized by station.



Staff and volunteer attendees share their ideas with facilitators at input stations located around the room.

The topics addressed by the five stations covered a wide range of concepts in order to gauge the current attitudes towards the mission, gain insight about how to improve future interpretation, and collect specific input on the events and activities that will comprise the bicentennial commemoration.

Conclusion

The input received from the staff and volunteer attendees shed a great deal of light on how the current interpretation at the mission impacts the roles, responsibilities, and interactions of those who work directly with the visiting public. The honest responses revealed many challenges but also identified many opportunities. Attendees shared creative and relevant ideas for the specific activities to mark the mission's 200th anniversary. Because of their experience working, volunteering, and engaging with park visitors at the mission they also offered practical and thoughtful ideas that would improve and broaden future interpretation.

Staff and volunteers informally shared with their supervisors, colleagues, and the meeting facilitators that the meeting was a very positive experience that made them feel heard and provided an opportunity for genuine engagement. The dedication and investment that staff and volunteers have for the mission is clear from their thoughtful input. Their comments and perspectives will be invaluable to the development of the Sonoma Mission 200 plan. Their feedback about the meeting will guide future facilitated staff and volunteer engagement through the development and implementation of the Sonoma Mission 200 plan.

Topic Station Feedback

Five stations were positioned at different locations throughout the room. Each station addressed a different topic related to current interpretation at the mission and aimed to gauge attitudes towards existing conditions and offerings, gain insights about areas in need of improvement, collect ideas about how to make improvements, and solicit specific ideas for commemorating the 200th anniversary. The five stations included:

- **Memorable Moments.** This station identified the places, stories, and people at the mission that make lasting impressions on visitors
- **What is the mission's value?** This station highlighted the reasons why the mission is important.

- **Difficult History.** This station encouraged discussion about what aspects of the mission's history are most difficult to interpret.
- **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.** This station examined interpretive exhibits, community engagement, and educational programs at the mission and evaluated them based on the categories listed in the title.
- **What should we do?** This station solicited ideas for 200th anniversary activities and programs.

More detailed descriptions of each station as well as responses received are presented below.

Memorable Moments

At this station, attendees were asked to write down their most memorable interactions with people at the mission. These interactions could involve visitors, staff, volunteers, school groups, etc. and they could have been either positive or negative. There was a "Negative" column and a "Positive" column. Sticky notes with the attendees' responses were put in the appropriate column.

Overall staff and volunteers reported more positive interactions than negative with 25 positive responses and 16 negative ones. Many of the positive interactions involved the December special event at the mission, Holidays on the Northern Frontier. The decorations, activities, and ambience created by the event seem to have a lasting and positive impact on visitors and staff and volunteers alike. Several respondents also mentioned interactions with students. School groups that have been well-prepared prior to their visit seem to make an impression with park staff and those students gain more from their time at the mission. Other positive experiences include references that draw upon the power of place-the peaceful courtyard and the magical moment of a wedding. Several respondents refer specifically to the chapel and mention listening to the choir in that space.

The negative memories at the mission heavily reference interactions and conversations that deal with the mission's Native American history. These interactions have made lasting negative impressions of park staff and volunteers by oftentimes presenting an extreme stance on opposing viewpoints. Many park staff and volunteers have been the person on whom people take out their anger about the historic treatment of Native Americans and how their story is not aptly respected. Staff feel, "Unprepared to answer questions about slavery

from BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color)." The opposing viewpoint has more commonly troubled staff and volunteers as they have interacted with visitors who use derogatory language towards Native Americans and claim that these groups of people were saved by the mission and should be thankful.

Other memorable moments include site and structure maintenance including cleaning up out of the ordinary messes, fixing historic structures, the age and condition of the chapel, and accessibility issues.



Responses received on sticky notes at the Memorable Moments station.

What is the Mission's Value?

Attendees were asked to share three reasons why they felt the mission is valuable to them. They were then asked to place each value in the category that best described its importance: historical, cultural, economic, personal, educational, or interpretive. Below are responses, organized by category:

Historical

The mission is historically important because it...

- tells the story of the people who lived here before, during, and after the mission.
- is the place where history happened.

- is an example of historic adobe architecture and it seeks to display the historic landscape.
- is historical, but it should tell the whole truth.
- is a landmark of Sonoma that makes me feel grounded to know it's here, I hope for a very long time.
- documents how immigrants (Italian, etc.) worked at the mission and established themselves in the area or throughout the United States.
- was built/founded as a war point to eventually establish the Pueblo of Sonoma.
- was the northernmost mission.
- was the only mission under Mexican rule.
- stopped Russian expansion.
- is connected to the origins of California statehood.
- represents the end of the mission era and the beginning of secularization.
- represents architecture trends in California.
- is a tangible piece of early California history.

Cultural

The mission is culturally important because...

- California Indians were brought from the area to work at the mission. They had to give up their way of life for a new one.
- It provides the opportunity to share, relate, and learn about the mission and the many cultures related to it.
- It is the recent origin of the town of Sonoma.
- It has a diversity of meaning to so many different cultures.
- It is an opportunity to share the truth.
- It can share information about the spiritual lives of the baptized Native people.
- of its importance to those with Catholic faith.
- It represents the story of subcultures emerging in historic California.
- It represents Spanish influence in Alta California.

Economic

The mission is economically important because...

- It brings tourists to Sonoma.

- It brings tourists to Sonoma and offers a non-wine related attraction to the area.
- Its history is also connected to the agricultural industry.
- Because before the wine industry exploded, Sonoma was still a tourist destination. The mission and SSHP are a draw on their own merit.
- The mission brings extra visitors to Sonoma Plaza and Barrack store, which is a source of income for the non-profit association.
- It is a major draw for tourism. Many wine tasters take a break with mission history.
- It is a part of the trading and exchanging of goods and services within the community.
- It presents an opportunity to collaborate with outside businesses.
- It has the possibility to merge with the wine business.
- It offers family events at reasonable costs.

Personal

The mission is personally important to me because...

- I meditate on past lives in the chapel.
- I grew up in Sonoma. As a child, I participated in community events. As a parent, I brought my children to community events. This mission holds an important place in the community.
- It is a place of tranquility.
- Of its location. It is the most tangible place to examine self-behavior in the mission context.
- I have memories from past field trips, weddings, etc. and it is a religious site/destination.
- I sometimes pray on my knees at the chapel. Although it's not run by the Catholic church, it still has religious value.
- It is a gathering space, because of its landscaping, and because of its fountain.

Educational

The mission has educational value because...

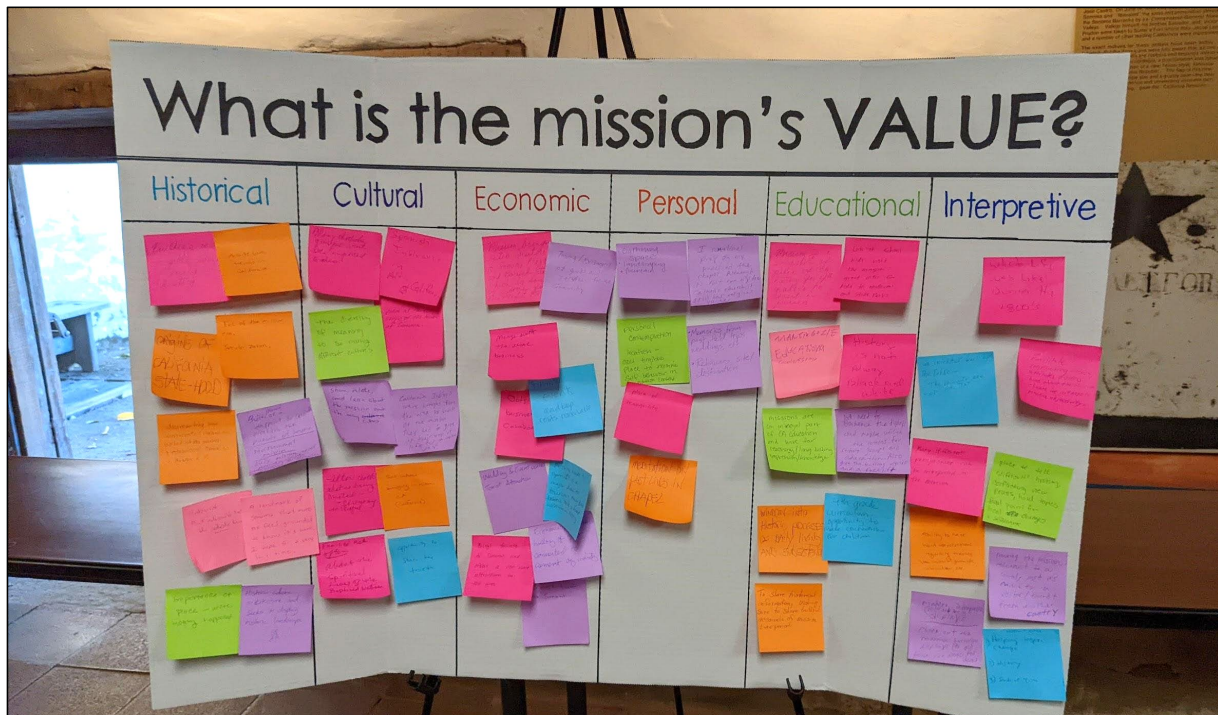
- It shares historical information, making sure to share truthful accounts of the mission time period.
- It is a window into historic processes of daily living and subsistence.

- As a part of 4th grade curriculum it provides an opportunity to make connections for children.
- Missions are an integral part of California education and have for reaching/long lasting impression/knowledge.
- History is not always black and white.

Interpretive

The mission has interpretive value because...

- It can help inspire change, present history and a sense of time.
- It makes the mission relevant to locals just as much as visitors/tourists from another country.
- It provides the ability to have hard conversations regarding themes like cultural genocide, colonialism, etc.
- It is a place to tell "difficult" history, conflicting viewpoints, hard topics, and is a focal point for local changes & settlement.
- Many different perspectives can be interpreted at the mission.
- We interact well with the public-the docents are good for that.
- It can facilitate conflicting views and attitudes visitors have about the mission. It is a chance for interpreters to practice objectivity.
- It can interpret what life was like during the 1800s.



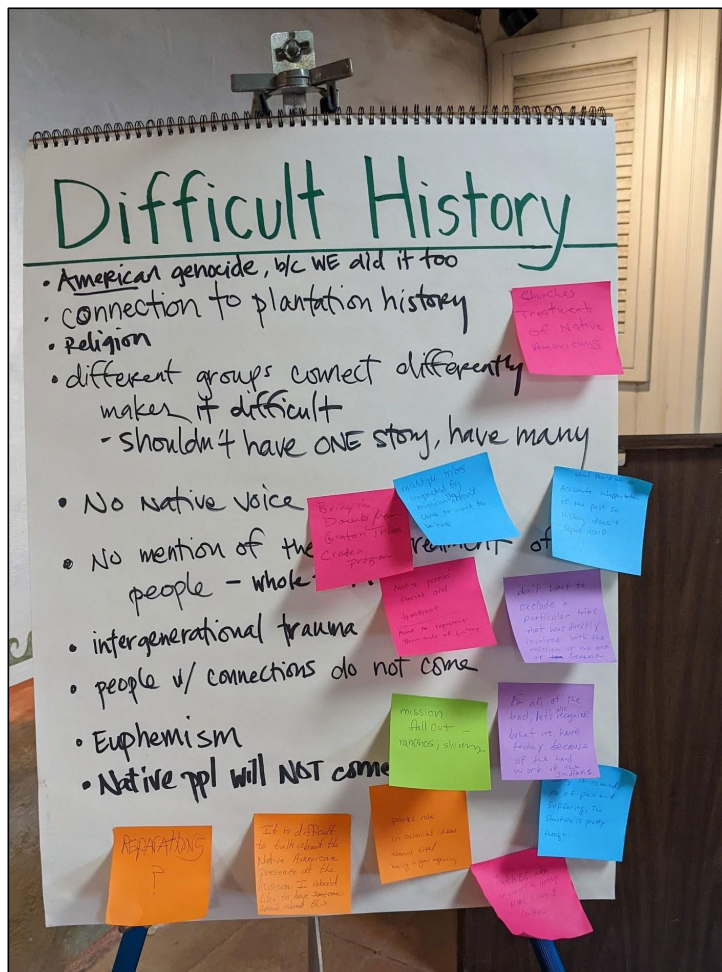
Responses at the Value station, placed in appropriate categories.

Difficult History

Attendees were asked what they thought was the most difficult part of the mission's history to interpret. A follow up question asked for ideas on what could be done to make it easier for staff and volunteers to interpret this difficult history. At this station a meeting facilitator recorded attendees' answers during discussions. Participants were also free to submit their answers on sticky notes.

Overall, most respondents felt that the historic treatment of Native Americans during the mission period was the most difficult and darkest part of the mission's history to interpret. Many attendees felt that current interpretation offered at the mission did not adequately address the Native American mission experience and did not provide interpreters with the tools to represent this story. This includes

no Native voice, no mention of the true treatment of the people, the use of euphemisms, and the complexity of the Park's role as a government agency while interpreting colonial concepts. Participants also noted that Native Americans often do not want to visit the mission as it is a site of pain and suffering. The religious aspects of the mission's history was also cited as a difficult topic for interpretation.



Facilitator notes based on discussions with attendees as well as input received on sticky notes.

Suggestions for improving interpretation of the mission's difficult history include supporting reparations, bringing in Native American docents, and not just presenting one story, but many.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

Participants were asked to engage in a marketing analysis exercise to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of three different aspects of the mission.

Interpretive Exhibits

The evaluation of interpretive exhibits encompassed all current interpretive elements both inside and outside of the mission. The responses are presented by category.



Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified for the mission's interpretive exhibits.

Strengths:

- Hands on programs bring tangible connections
- DIS Staff there to interpret
- Lots of space; Great artwork
- Easy to understand; Simple concepts
- English AND Spanish exhibits
- A decent mix of natural science and history/archaeology
- Special collection of paintings with identification of location & date.
- Stations of cross in chapel with space to contemplate
- The Jorgenson paintings

- I like the canon
- Mission paintings
- Location in town
- The map in the entry desk area is very useful in telling visitors that Missions were not built in a geographical line. (ie. They began with San Diego, went to Monterey (Carmel), etc.)
- Can be a foundation start for what we want to enhance.
- Blank slate for many areas for increased interpretation.
- Having a map of CA showing the Native groups is very helpful. Oura may be outdated; The display in the Bell Room showing the Adobe brick is very helpful in teaching people about the building itself.
- Mission chapel: The simplicity speaks to the young history of the Sonoma Mission as opposed to older missions; Jorgenson collection: This exhibit offers visitors one location to understand the scope of the mission system.

Weaknesses:

- So many things need attention and repairs; it's so hard to keep clean
- Inaccurate or scattered information
- Exhibits very dated
- Lack of period artifacts or reproductions
- Outdated
- Interpretive exhibits need to be updated. Some exhibits need changing. Our museum is embarrassing.
- Interpretive panels in multiple languages would be nice
- Redesign entrance to be more relevant to the mission
- Courtyard fountain not working
- The Mission Native people interpretive panel is weak. Needs updating to current interpretation.
- No Native American voice
- The archaeology exhibit in the Bell Room is BLAH. It doesn't tell a story; The "Meryns" panels feel like space filler. The only one I refer to frequently is the one with the map showing Baja missions
- Exhibits are outdated, lights on exhibits are broken. Archaeological photo exhibit should be dated so you can see the order/timeline of discovery.
- Lack of Native American history and interpretation.

- Needs more bilingual exhibits
- Age of structure and utilities
- Invite Native groups to add to the displays
- Condition of the building itself; ADA? Fountain?
- Languages for signage

Opportunities:

- Native voice
- Developing Native American experience displays
- Engaging with local tribes to build interpretive materials/opportunities
- Mission chapel needs to be spruced up for commemoration.
- Update exhibits to be inclusive.
- Unique and interactive displays utilizing more technology would be nice.
- Need updated exhibits in the "bell" room, as they scream 1960's & are boring & in some cases inaccurate, for example the adobe brick is mislabeled as a cougar instead of a bear & "cougar" is misspelled as "couger", it's also facing the wrong way in the display case so folks can't recognize it as a paw print. It currently just looks like a broken brick.
- Ask staff for copies of their interpretive information and develop new displays & new interpretive display boards/artifact info, including artifacts in the courtyard.

Threats:

- Curatorial costs to maintain museum-quality artifacts
- Funding/time needed to develop appropriate materials that engage all stakeholders.
- Changing scholarship. Changes faster than panels, exhibits can be made.
- Ghost tours and other for-hire tours that tell a fake or misleading history
- Damage from delayed maintenance (ie. roof leaks, rodents, etc.)
- Visible disrepair on building (bad reputation)
- Protests from various stakeholders. How do we engage in a productive way?

- IT and building not maintained & structural integrity compromised.
- Language creates confusion.

Community Engagement

The evaluation of community engagement referred to any of the mission's community events, activities, and programs. In addition, it also referred to relationships and partnerships within the community and how active or successful the mission is at collaborating, consulting, and working with appropriate partners including tribes, businesses, historical societies, libraries, etc.



Input on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the mission's community engagement.

Strengths:

- Low cost of entry
- It was really the founding piece of Sonoma and parts of the original chapel went to the building materials of other structures in the plaza.
- Visual "presence" of the building
- Christmas at the mission/On the frontier is a community favorite event

- Mission is located in the heart of Sonoma
- Location: People do not need to drive a long way to visit
- Events at the Mission: Children's Day, Christmas at the Mission
- Education, school field trips
- Location of building draws in visitors; December event is very popular
- Good relationship with visitor center
- Junior ranger
- Multiple voices/entities (Diverse take on history) (See threats)
- Partnership with schools
- Ability to work with docents
- Docent program and dedicated volunteers (not just docents!)
- Location, Location, Location

Weaknesses:

- A need to advertise and branch out to people in the community who may be prospective docents.
- Displays, Displays, Displays!
- Highly divisive history
- Not all community members represented
- Some people come in with preconceived notions about our opinions about the mission's history.
- Funding for employees to provide community engagement.
- Improve relationships with the local press. No connection with publicity.
- Staff turnover limits our ability to build community relationships.
- Schools not knowing about the school group program at the mission.
- Not ADA accessible.
- Volunteers feel neglected; want connection to sites.
- Need more staff for visitor services and maintenance.
- Poor state of building maintenance and poor upkeep of other buildings in Sonoma SHP.
- Lack of guidance on how to manage romantic view, attitude community has & how to manage their place attachment.
- State Parks lack staff to meet regularly with partners.
- Time needed to engage meaningfully & build relationships & trust.

Opportunities:

- The opportunity is available for us to branch out and bring in more of our community to be docents.
- More special events, especially those geared to children really draw in people
- Story can evolve
- More music/choral concerts
- Mission workers- Sponsor an event for them
- Focus on agricultural history and connection to the present
- Let our community know our facilities are available for public use; Create a "locals" pass. Perhaps \$25 for 2 Adults & Kids to visit SSHP OR do a better job of marketing the state history pass.
- Buy the cheese factory and integrate it.
- Involve youth groups
- Integrate "wine"
- Bicycle tours- Stop at mission as part of the tour.
- Tells all the facets of the mission jewel- good, bad, and ugly
- Bus and tour concession opportunities
- Bilingual staff/docents
- Need to partner with city of Sonoma and other local partners more often
- Rotating exhibits about local figures at the mission
- Community loves it and the memorial and we need to make others feel that pride and appreciation for history.
- Gift shop sales.
- More outreach to locals to get them to visit often.
- Diverse range of interest that can be tapped into (e.g. art, history, architecture)
- Partner with Visitor Bureau to advertise and give feedback
- Online computer classes
- Involve church groups
- Popular place so can be wide reaching platform to community
- Graton funding for Native Cultural Center

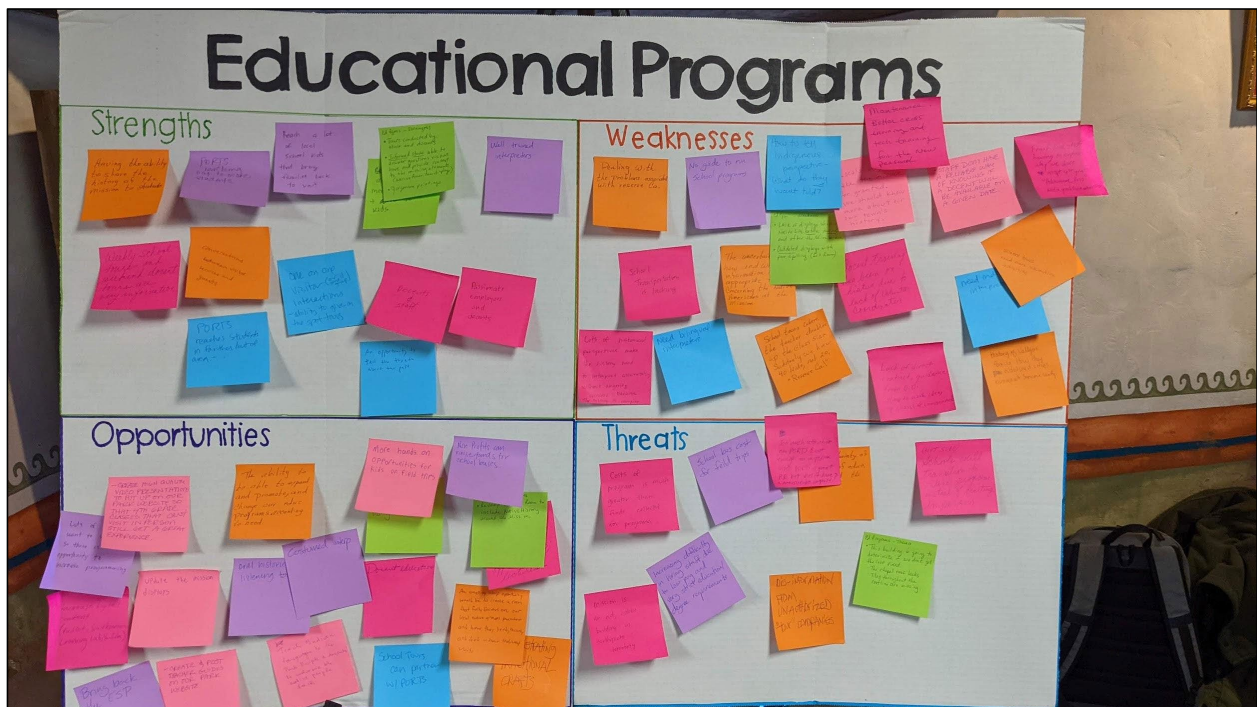
Threats:

- As we go down this path of commemoration, we need to address additional lighting/fixing existing lighting with LED's, security officers, and security cameras

- Avoid painting only one picture about the mission
- Not acknowledging or remodeling the hegemony properly
- Small front office/lack of space to spread out (COVID)
- Wine economy brings lots of tourists, if that industry suffered- visitorship may drop
- When our facilities look shabby and rundown, they are not inviting to visitors (Beef up the maintenance budget and pay them well); If we do not tell the complete story of the mission (good & bad), then we risk alienating the next generation of our diverse population.
- Multiple voices/entities (too many, possible conflicts) (see strengths)
- City wants to use the park for other things
- City wishes to be able to use some of our locations for their business. "Not Okay"
- City doesn't seem to like State Parks and seems to only support the wine industry

Educational Programs

The analysis of educational programs applies to the Environmental Living Program, PORTS programs as well as in-person tours and any other educational outreach.



The mission's educational program analyzed for its strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats.

Strengths:

- Makes history more engaging and alive to kids.
- Tours conducted by staff and docents; informed staff able to answer questions visitors have and provide context to the missing elements (Native American displays); Jorgensen paintings
- An opportunity to tell the truth about the past.
- Well trained interpreters.
- Passionate employees and docents.
- Docents & staff.
- Weekly school tours and weekend docent tours are very informative.
- Reaches a lot of local school kids that bring families back to visit.
- PORTS reaching out to more students.
- Having the ability to share the history of the mission to students.
- Conversations between visitor services and guests.
- PORTS reaches students farther/out of the area.
- One on one visitor (or small group) interactions; ability to give on the spot tours.

Weaknesses:

- School tours need more interactive activities.
- Front line staff having to explain why we don't accept 4th grade "adventure pass", not a good first interaction.
- How to tell indigenous perspective, what do THEY want told?
- No guide to run school programs.
- Dealing with the problems associated with Reserve CA.
- Lack of displays showing native life before, during, and after the mission era; outdated displays with poor spelling (Bell Room)
- Locals might take the mission for granted, we should know more about our own town's history.
- Maintenance: better cross training and tech training for the new personnel.
- School transportation is lacking.
- The uncertainty of how and what information is appropriate to share concerning the Native Americans at the mission.
- Docent training has been on hiatus due to lack of volunteer coordination.

- Staff don't have a reliable way of knowing if a docent will be available on a given date.
- Need indigenous interpreters.
- History of Vallejo's family. How they established cities throughout Sonoma County.
- Lack of direct contact, guidance from District Office; slow to work ideas up chain of command
- School tours where the teacher doubles up the class size. Suddenly we have 40 kids, not 20. "Reserve CA!"
- Need bilingual interpreters.
- Lots of historical perspectives make the history hard to interpret accurately without angering someone because the history is complex.

Opportunities:

- Demonstrating traditional crafts.
- An amazing interpretive opportunity would be to create a room that fully focuses on our local native groups pre-contact and how they lived, thrived, and died in their traditional ways.
- School tours can partner with PORTS.
- Docent education.
- Teach Indian languages to the park people & docents to welcome native people back.
- Create and post teacher guides on our park website.
- Bring back the ESP.
- Oral histories listening tour.
- Costumed interpretation.
- Update the mission displays.
- Non-profits can raise funds for school buses.
- More hands-on opportunities for kids on field trips.
- Revamp the Bell Room to include native history around the mission.
- Expand the docent program, need more docents to meet needs, offer more lectures.
- Can tell stories and bring in many voices.
- We need to have black powder training. We can then share it during demonstrations.
- The ability to be able to expand and promote, and change over educational programs according to need.

- Create high quality video presentations to put up on our park website so that 4th grade classes that can't visit in person can still get a great experience.
- Lots of schools want to visit so there is an opportunity to increase programming.
- Increase digital content (Padlet, Smithsonian Learning Lab, YouTube)

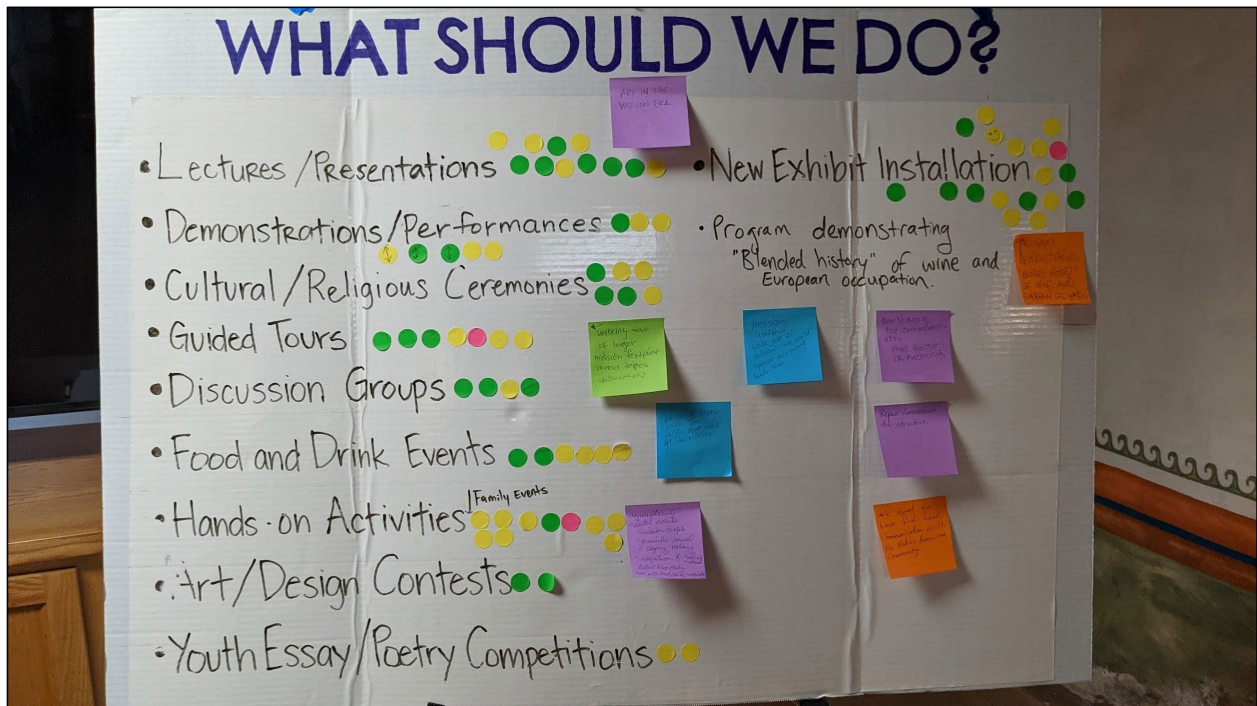
Threats:

- Increasing difficulty in hiring staff due to low pay and very strict education/degree requirements.
- Disinformation from unauthorized "tour" companies
- This building is going to deteriorate if we don't get the roof fixed; The chapel roof leaks and tiles throughout the roofline are missing.
- Schools could transition to online programs instead of visiting in person.
- The uncertainty of the future of education programs at the mission.
- Costs of the program are much greater than funds collected for programs.
- Too much attention on PORTS & not enough attention on in person visits. PORTS is great PR but does it have a measurable impact?
- School bus costs for field trips
- Mission is an old, adobe building in earthquake territory.

200th Anniversary Activities

Attendees were asked what activities, events, programs, and initiatives should State Parks organize to commemorate the mission's 200th anniversary? They were presented with a series of ideas and were encouraged to add their own ideas to the list. Each attendee voted for their three favorite ideas using stickers. The results of the voting process are presented below:

What Should We Do?



Attendees voted on ideas using stickers and also added their own ideas using sticky notes.