

# Salamander finding may stall school construction

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*Endangered species*

APTOS — Plans to break ground on a \$24 million construction project at Aptos High School this summer may be slithering away after the discovery of an endangered salamander near the campus last week.

A biologist giving the campus a final look-see before the start of construction found at least one Santa Cruz long-toed salamander in the area, said Aptos High Principal Diane Burbank.



The discovery of the endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander near Aptos High may delay the school's construction plans.

Photo courtesy of ENature.com

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**The salamander is just the latest headache for Pajaro Valley school officials. The district is already coping with mold problems at a new high school under construction on Harkins Slough Road in Watsonville.**

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Burbank said the Pajaro Valley Unified School District is working to protect the salamander habitat and begin construction in June, as scheduled, but is worried about possible delays.

The biggest concern: contractors are planning to do grading and other heavy-duty work this summer when there aren't large numbers of students and

See **SALAMANDER** on **PAGE A7**

## Salamander

Continued from Page A1

personnel on campus.

"This is an important window for us," Burbank said.

Aptos High already has made plans to move its summer school and weight room off-campus to accommodate construction crews.

The project is scheduled to include a new performing arts center, a new gym, a new pool and improvements to the school's stadium and roads.

Lois Grunwald, spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said her agency is aware of the Aptos High discovery and is looking into it, but hasn't taken any action to delay construction.

The Santa Cruz long-toed salamander is a slender, black reptile with a sooty belly and a series of yellow to orange markings on its back.

A subspecies of the long-toed salamander, which ranges from Northern California to Canada, the reptile lives only in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

Brendan Cummings, staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity in Idyllwild, said the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander is a relic of the past — an ancient reptile living hundreds of miles from its nearest relatives.

"You don't really hear much about the species because it's so localized," he said.

Most of the Santa Cruz salamander's habitats are either protected or developed at this point, he said, making for little contro-

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## 'Hey, there's the UC Santa Cruz Banana Slugs, why not the Aptos High Salamanders?'

APTOS HIGH PRINCIPAL DIANE BURBANK

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versy compared to other endangered species.

The reptile spends most of the year in chaparral and pine-oak woodlands before traveling to a handful of ponds during the rainy season to breed.

Burbank, the Aptos principal, is taking the salamander's presence in stride, even joking the Aptos High School Mariners might change their mascot to embrace the school's new reptilian friend, discovered in 1954 and declared an endangered species in 1967.

"Hey, there's the UC Santa Cruz

Banana Slugs, why not the Aptos High Salamanders?" she said.

The salamander is just the latest headache for Pajaro Valley school officials. The district is already coping with mold problems at a new high school under construction on Harkins Slough Road in Watsonville.

District administrators overseeing construction did not return calls for comment Tuesday.

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