

SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER

CATEGORY

Wellness/Education

SUMMARY

The San Francisco Zen Center has three locations in the San Francisco area that provide day-to-day practice for a small community and larger format retreats that provide extended sessions. They have a committed member base and are embarking on an ambitious growth plan.

NUMBERS

Founded	1962
Members/Students	150-200
Instructors	15
Revenue (year)	USD\$3.8M
Expenses (year)	USD\$2.8M
Campus	San Francisco, CA
CEO/President	Susan O'Connell

MISSION

"The purpose of San Francisco Zen Center is to make accessible and embody the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha as expressed in the Soto Zen tradition established by Dogen Zenji in 13th-century Japan and conveyed to us by Suzuki Roshi and other Buddhist teachers. Our practice flows from the insight that all beings are Buddha, and that sitting in meditation is itself the realization of Buddha nature, or enlightenment."

HISTORY

Founder of the SFZC, Shunryu Suzuki, came to San Francisco in 1959 to serve as head priest of a Soto Temple in Japantown, San Francisco. As a fluent English speaker and advocate for the inclusion of non-Japanese Americans in Zen practice, Suzuki soon began to attract followers from the Beatnik community, reinforced by the rise of the social movements of the 60's. After being ousted from the Soto Temple for dedicating much of his time to non-Asian students, Suzuki purchased the current City Center building. In 1972 the SFZC purchased Green Gulch Farm with the purpose of creating a community of practitioner families who could pursue a Buddhist way of life while working the farm together. The SFZC have engaged in numerous commercial ventures as part of their programming including the purchase and subsequent sale of a pastry company, a clothing store front, grocery and Greens Restaurant, a pioneer of gourmet vegetarian cuisine in America. Greens purchased their produce from the Green Gulch Farm.

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In 1970, Suzuki gave Dharma transmission to Richard Baker who subsequently ran the SFZC until his resignation over several alleged sexual affairs in 1984. Baker subsequently spent much time struggling to rebuild a Zen community but failed due to his highly publicized downfall. Though he appears to be making amends with the Center and there has been a renewal of “dharma relations”.

PROGRAMMING

The SFZC offers a wide range of programs for all level of practitioner, including: Zazen Meditation Practice, Public Lectures and Tea Services. Most of these programs are offered for a donation rather than fixed price.

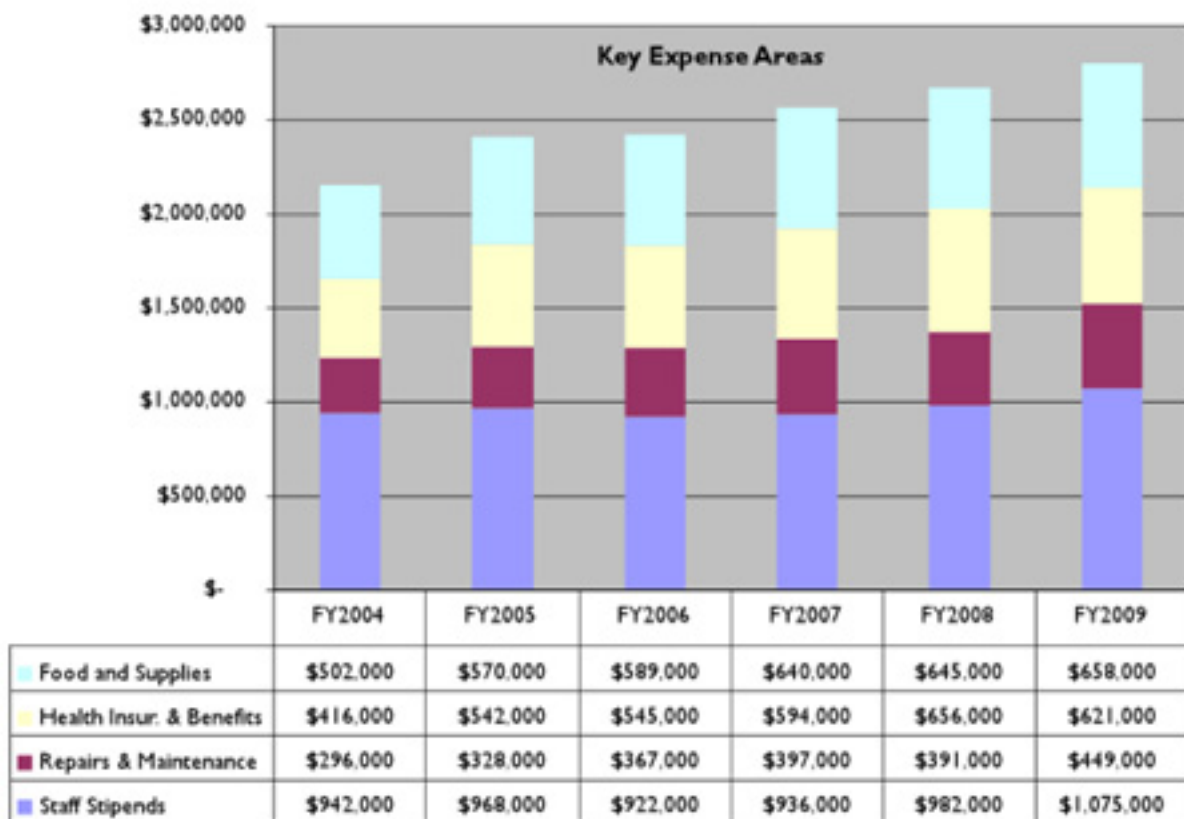
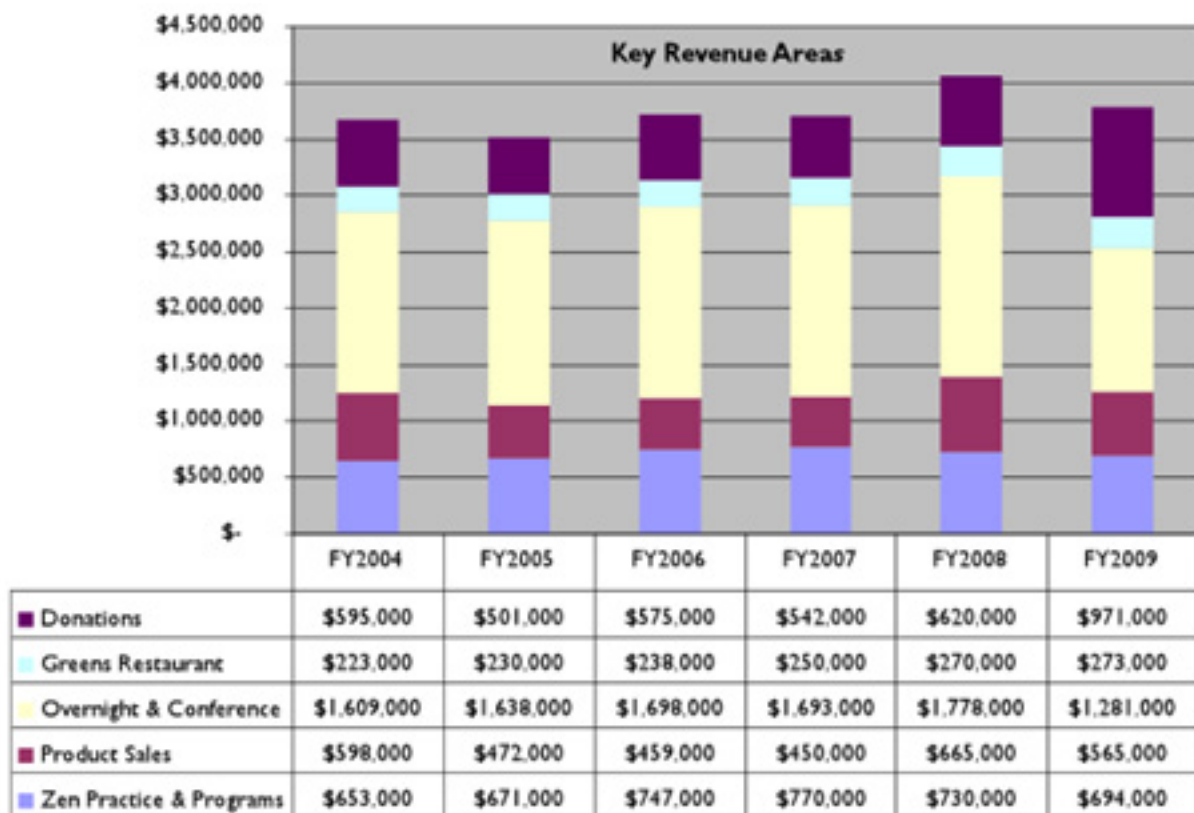
Dharma Talks:

“Dharma Talks by Zen teachers are a traditional method of transmitting the heart and understanding of Buddha’s Way.” The SFZC has begun to live-stream these talks via the web (www.livestream.com) in an effort to widen their reach and cement a community of alumni and disparate members who otherwise would not remain engaged with the centers activities.

FINANCES

As noted in the graphs below, the SFZC generates much of its income (35%) from overnight stays and conferences. Overall, the center derives over 84% of its revenue from program services and only 16% from fundraising efforts. However, it must be noted that revenues have remained flat, and are predicted to remain flat over the next few years, and the SFZC is anticipating this trend to continue resulting in a USD\$1m deficit by 2014 without significant changes in, or an expanding of revenue sources.

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To this end, the SFZC has embarked on a capital campaign in which they hope to raise over USD\$17M to finance a new retreat center on their Tassajara property to help expand their overnight capacities.

They are also in the planning stages of developing a “Zen Inspired Senior Living Community”, offering seniors a place to age in accordance to Zen practices. They have some experience in this area as they have participated in a Zen Hospice Program. They expect this to also be a significant source of revenue after costs are recouped.

As part of their capital campaign, they are developing a “Fourth Center”: an online platform for community engagement. They hope that this will allow them to extend their reach beyond their physical centers (through live streaming), but also to solidify a base of support among their alumni, a network they hope to tap as they plan expansion and require funding.

CONCLUSION

The San Francisco Zen Center is a longstanding organization that, like its contemporaries, managed to secure properties through a highly active support base in the early 1960's. Since then it has been operating at roughly the same scale with minor changes in program and governance policies. It is only recently that the Zen Center has embarked on a more ambitious plan of expanding offerings and becoming more active in seeking out new members and markets. This is evidenced not only by their planned expansion into the elderly care market, but also in their efforts to extend the value of their programming through information technologies and online platforms. It remains to be seen if this will provide the growth they are hoping for and enable them to escape the apparent ceiling in their ability to generate revenues.