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Beauty Call

Cleanup goals for city involve collaboration

By Jaime Adame

More than 35 years ago, Streets Commissioner Sid Patterson was stumped.

"He got a call from a random kid in high school asking what he was doing to replace the trees on 51st Street," said April Hastings, program director for Up With Trees.

But Patterson knew the city didn't have a budget to replace the trees cleared for a streets project. So in 1976, he founded Up with Trees, an organization that has gone on to plant thousands of trees in the area, including the planting of 166 trees downtown this year.

"He began it kind of collaborating with various entities," Hastings said, describing how Patterson, who died last year, set the tone to work with government, businesses and individuals. "This organization has kind of always worked in that direction," Hastings said.

Beautifying Tulsa was formally adopted by the Tulsa City Council last year as a goal for the city, and efforts to improve the appearance of neighborhoods and city-owned properties often involve that same collaborative spirit.

On a breezy but sunny morning, Chris Jones was ready to work. The senior manager of facilities for tool company Hilti also serves on committees for Tulsa's Habitat for Humanity. Last week, the nonprofit kicked off an ambitious new effort with a four-day cleanup in the Crutchfield section of North Tulsa.

"We wanted to find a way to impact more families and really improve neighborhoods," Jones said. Along with cleaning up alleyways and trimming trees, the ongoing effort involves pairing volunteers with homeowners to make relatively modest improvements to their homes, like shoring up an aging porch, roof or fence.

During the four-day cleanup, the city helped by picking up cleared tree limbs and debris curbside. Jones said a memorandum of understanding agreement is being drafted to formalize a partnership between the city, Habitat for Humanity, and Hilti to work together to improve the Crutchfield area.

Jones said the neighborhood was drawn up in the 1910s, making it one of Tulsa's oldest. It includes portions of N. Peoria Avenue and N. Utica Avenue, with a northern border of E. Pine Street and U.S. 75, according to an economic revitalization plan for the neighborhood put together about 10 years ago.

One problem is a large number of vacant lots, Jones said, describing about 240 such lots in an area that's only about one square mile.

Habitat for Humanity has already purchased some lots previously owned by the city and built homes in the neighborhood. Empty lots in urban areas generally are viewed as problematic. Potentially, they can be sites for illegal dumping or crime, and they have been cited as pulling down the values of nearby homes.

However, vacant urban plots also present opportunities. Notably, St. Louis held an open competition this year offering \$5,000 in seed money to winners selected to install demonstration projects on some city-owned lots. Winners included a proposal for an outdoor chess park, a project involving the planting of sunflowers and an effort to transform surplus cargo containers into "a compact restaurant and culinary destination."

In the Crutchfield area, a more straightforward idea has gained some traction with the city, according to Jones: selling more lots to Habitat for Humanity to allow for more homes to go to lower-income residents.

Mayor Dewey Bartlett's administration has boosted funds citywide for abatement of nuisance homes and areas, with city leaders citing citizen survey results as a reason to make the effort a higher priority.



In Bartlett's budget proposal released April 30, funding for the abatement program remained constant, Bartlett said, but elsewhere the city included cost-saving measures that could pose a challenge to beautification efforts.

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Bartlett's budget --which has yet to be approved by the city council -- would do away with two mowing cycles for parks and other city-owned properties, saving about \$180,000 yearly, according to Mike Kier, the city's finance director. The budget proposal also calls for reducing the watering of landscaped city medians.

However, the city last year began a partnership with Up with Trees to have the nonprofit take care of three long stretches of median: on E. 71st Street (from Riverside Drive to South Garnett Road), S. Yale Avenue (from E. 51st Street to E. 61st Street) and E. 15th Street (from S. Harvard Avenue to S. Yale Avenue).

"We haven't discussed the option of helping with other intersections and or other city properties," Hastings said. In July, Up With Trees began handling the watering, pruning and mulching required to keep up the medians, as well as weed-eating and some litter clean-up. Up With Trees is seeking sponsors willing to pay for the maintenance in exchange for a sign at the sites.

The organization also worked with the city, the Downtown Coordinating Council and the Tulsa Community Foundation to plant trees downtown. The Warren K. Warren Foundation provided trees and city workers widened tree wells or cut into sidewalks where necessary.

The goal was to get as many trees planted prior to the Bassmaster Classic fishing tournament, said Steve Grantham, director of operations for Up With Trees, referring to the February event that reportedly drew around 100,000 to downtown venues for weigh-ins and an expo related to the tournament.

"We have a matching grant from the Tulsa Community Foundation and we are raising money to actually pay for" the project, Grantham added, describing a goal to eventually plant a total of about 560 trees downtown.

In 2005, the Tulsa Beautification Foundation formed with seed money from the George Kaiser Family Foundation, providing matching grant money to organizations undertaking beautification projects.

In November, the city created the Adopt-A-Spot program, offering supplies and recognition to volunteers pledging to cleanup a specific area. So far, a total of 13 sites have been adopted by 12 groups or individuals, according to the city.

Other notable efforts include a River Parks Authority river cleanup in February and the yearly efforts of Tulsa Young Professionals in their Street Cred project to revitalize neighborhoods through cleanups and demonstration projects. This weekend, May 11 -- after several earlier workdays -- the group is putting the spotlight on E. 36th Street North and N. Peoria Avenue with a festival-like event featuring food trucks and music.

Applications for matching grants from the Tulsa Beautification Foundation are due by July 1 and available at cityoftulsa.org, which also contains information about the city's Adopt-A-Spot program.

Send all comments and feedback regarding City to jadame@urbantulsa.com

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