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BROWN SPRINGS ECOSCAPE

Brown Springs Neighborhood

The neighborhood is located in the foothills of Ruffner Mountain, and until recent years, had a distinct “rural” feel to it. Residents raised their own vegetables, had small livestock, and drew water from the spring located at the proposed EcoScape site. The land around the spring had a small fruit orchard and served as a community gathering place.

In the 1950s, the spring was capped, and the neighborhood was connected to the city water supply. As a consequence, the site lost its appeal as a community center and fell into disuse. What was once a source of community pride has now become an eyesore.

Community Revitalization

During the past decade, Jefferson County (metropolitan Birmingham) has lost over 10% of its population due to urban sprawl. As a result, there are over 8,000 vacant lots in and around the city. A few neighborhoods, notably Crestwood, Avondale, and Glen Iris, have recently been “rediscovered” by young professionals seeking a traditional neighborhood for their families. A distinctive appeal of each of these areas is the presence of a community park, something which is lacking in Brown Springs.

Community EcoScapes

The Southern Environmental Center’s involvement in transforming vacant or blighted urban spaces into community building blocks dates back to 1996 when it opened its first EcoScape Garden at Birmingham-Southern College (BSC). A strip of land that had previously been used by BSC’s maintenance department to store discarded transformers, air conditioners, etc. was transformed by SEC into a botanical/art garden that has since been featured in nationally known publications like *Southern Living* and *Sculpture* magazines. Nine local artists recycled materials from the site and contributed their artwork to the visually stunning “secret gardens” found in the EcoScape. Each piece is specifically designed to complement the center’s presentations on sustainable urban ecology for school groups that tour the garden.

In 2001, the center raised over \$50,000 in funds and material donations, in order to build a second EcoScape in the economically underserved neighborhood of Woodlawn. What had been a littered vacant lot in a drug infested part of Birmingham was subsequently

transformed into an outdoor classroom for nearby Woodlawn High School and as a site for community festivals. An ornate recycled iron leaf fence now borders colorful flowers and fragrant herbs. Altamont School art students helped create playful, stepping stones that lead visitors past raised flowerbeds and fruit trees to a shaded patio painted with a stunning aboriginal motif. In 2002, the Woodlawn EcoScape beat out projects from a six-state area to receive the Garden Club of America's **Community Service Award**. In 2004, the Woodlawn EcoScape was honored by Keep Birmingham Beautiful with its **Urban Garden Award**.

The third and fourth community EcoScapes are located in the Arlington-West End neighborhood. At the 2005 Neighborhoods USA Convention in Sacramento, CA, the Arlington-West End EcoScape on Cotton Avenue was recognized as one of **the top three small community revitalization projects in the nation**. In July 2005, the new Healing Garden for the elderly was opened in the same neighborhood. Located opposite Princeton Towers, the long-term care facility of Princeton Baptist Medical Center, the Healing Garden combines specially designed visual arts exhibits with fragrance and wildflower gardens. It features herbs, fruit trees, and flowers traditionally grown in the 1940s and 1950s. The front fence is designed to resemble the famous Gee's Bend quilt patterns, and the center of the garden features a kinetic water sculpture. In addition to serving the neighborhood, it provides a therapeutic function for hospital staff, residents, and their families.

Brown Springs EcoScape

Located along 73rd Street off Oporto Madrid Blvd, the Brown Springs EcoScape will be constructed on adjacent vacant lots owned by the City of Birmingham and YW Homes. The EcoScape will be designed for use as a passive recreational facility. The objective will be to create a botanical setting complete with flowerbeds, seating areas, and panoramic vistas. Like Arlington-West End, a sustained focus of this project will be to bring out the history of the neighborhood. An effort will be made to uncover and restore the natural spring, which lies under the surface. If the water pressure is sufficient, a small (Avondale Park-like) pond will be created as a central feature. Next to the pond, a fruit orchard (much like what historically graced this area) will be installed for use by the community.

The location of the Brown Springs EcoScape directly complements the objectives outlined in the Ruffner Mountain Nature Center's master plan. 73rd Street provides historical access to the nature center and the visibility of our new EcoScape will make it easier for visitors and community residents alike to access the trail system.

Project Evaluation

The SEC will provide the ACS Campus Community Alliance with timely updates and site visits upon request. A proposed dedication of the Brown Springs EcoScape is planned for summer 2006.

Budget

Expenses

Landscaping (soil, raised beds, plants, etc.)	\$30,000
Wrought Iron Fence	\$12,000
Pavilion	\$12,000
Pavilion Mosaic	\$ 5,000
Pond Construction	\$ 4,000
Recycled Brick Walkways	\$ 1,000
Signage and educational materials	\$ 1,000
Park Benches (3)	\$ 2,000
Community Day	\$ 1,000
Resident Caretaker (part time)	\$ 5,000
TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET	\$73,000

Income

Brown Springs Neighborhood Association	\$30,000
Jefferson County Cultural Alliance	\$17,000
City of Birmingham	\$15,000
Wachovia Foundation	\$ 5,000
Associated Colleges of the South	\$ 1,000

In-Kind

TEC Rentals	\$ 1,000
Wade Sand and Gravel	\$ 4,000

TOTAL PROJECTED INCOME	\$73,000
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