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Nonprofit works to restore green canopy to Detroit

By DAVID RUNK – 11 hours ago

DETROIT (AP) — A batch of trees that will soon be planted on a wild, overgrown patch of land near a Detroit neighborhood is expected to be a step toward bringing back a vibrant, green canopy to the Motor City.

The nonprofit group Greening of Detroit is pushing urban reforestation — even during a tough economy — with projects as diverse as a Christmas tree farm, neighborhood gardens and thousands of tree plantings along busy streets.

"The need is expanding, so we're trying to keep pace," said Rebecca Salminen Witt, the organization's president.

Known a century ago for its tree-lined streets and neighborhoods, the city saw much of its greenery fall casualty to the spread of Dutch elm disease in the 1950s and, more recently, the tree-killing emerald ash borer.

These days, there is no time for replanting because the city's more than 50 forestry employees are focused on cutting down dead or dying trees across Detroit's 138 square miles.

"We can go in very shortly after the ash are down," said Paul Barley, Greening of Detroit's director of urban forestry. "And because we use almost all volunteers ... the labor cost is pretty low."

Barley said a tree that would cost the city \$100 by itself costs only about \$15 more in labor for Greening of Detroit to plant, much less than if a crew of city employees did the work. Greening of Detroit expects to plant about 2,400 trees this year, at a cost of about \$200,000.

Pepper Provenzano, executive director of Salt Lake City-based TreeLink, said nonprofits like Greening of Detroit are trying to fill in the gap for cities struggling with their finances to pay for public safety and other basic services.

"Cities across the country do not recognize and calculate the urban forest as a capital asset," said Provenzano, who helps local organizations pay for tree planting, care and education efforts. "Consequently, the canopy of our urbanized areas is too often relegated to the bottom ... of municipal budgets."

One of the Detroit group's projects will be re-establishing the city's own nursery, Walter I. Meyers Nursery at Rouge Park, where the city used to grow its own crop of trees to be planted elsewhere.

"We had 150 acres of land out there that was just sitting. It was a beautiful place to go," said Brad Dick, deputy director of the city's General Services Department. "I think it's going to be a huge benefit to the city."

Founded in 1920, the nursery was used less in the 1950s and 1960s as the city bought less expensive trees from other nurseries. It was eventually was left untended.

Today, the sound of birds and wind rustling the leaves drowns out most of the neighborhood noise. Some trees planted decades ago still stand in neat rows, too tall to replant. Tags identify some smaller trees that are candidates for replanting, while soggy wetlands and grassy fields that border the site give it a park-like feel.

Volunteers will spend the summer clearing brush, weeds and debris from the nursery. Plans call for about 20,000 trees to be planted there in the next five years, said Jill Katakowski, the organization's operations manager for the nursery. That will allow the group to use 3,000 to 5,000 trees a year from the nursery instead of buying them from commercial nurseries.

For Greening of Detroit, which marks its 20th anniversary this fall, the nursery project is just one piece of the planting efforts. From its offices about a block east of the remnants of Tiger Stadium, about two dozen staff coordinate streetside tree plantings and community gardens on vacant lots.

A garden is being planned at Eastern Market to show the prospects for small-scale farms in the city, and hundreds of schoolchildren participate in the group's environmental education projects.

Crews also are preparing a stretch of one of the city's main thoroughfares for about 530 trees. The roadway once was shaded by tall trees but now has many empty spots.

AP Associated Press

Map



"We want those trees not to just survive," Bairley said, "but thrive and jump out of those holes at us so that they will be able to form the kind canopy we need to cover six straight lanes of traffic."

On the Net:

- Greening of Detroit: <http://www.greeningofdetroit.com>

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