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Business consortium wants blooming boulevards downtown

by MELEAH MAYNARD Special to Finance & Commerce

Landscaping and urban planning firms look to attract shoppers, businesses

Minneapolis is known as a city with a lush urban forest that includes stately and beloved trees, like elms, maples, lindens and ash. Walking around downtown, though, it's hard to find evidence of the reasons for this verdant reputation, seeing as there is so much more gray everywhere than green. But that's going to change this spring when the Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District (DID) adds a new greening program to its current focus of making downtown cleaner and safer, said Sarah Harris, DID's chief operating officer.

Surveys of businesses, visitors and residents have long indicated a desire to incorporate more plants into the downtown landscape as cities like Chicago have done so successfully in recent years. But the creation of the DID (which is based on a model used nationwide) in 2009 has made that dream a reality thanks, in part, to money raised by a special assessment to all of the commercial properties inside the 120-block area that makes up the district.

To create the overall plan for the greening program the DID hired three local firms, Damon Farber Associates, Arteka and Tangle-town Gardens. While Damon Farber is known for being adept at landscape architecture and urban planning, Arteka specializes in installing large-scale commercial landscapes, and Tangle-town Gardens excels at artful and sustainable design.

"We wanted a group who could understand our need to look at our overall urban street grid and translate that into a landscape that would thrive and create visual impact," Harris explains. "Together they brought the full spectrum of design expertise that we needed."

Once the plan was complete, Tangle-town Gardens and Arteka were selected through a bidding process to be the joint creators of the greening program. This year's budget for everything from installation to maintenance is \$487,500, the hope being that the results will prove popular enough to expand the program over the next several years.

"We fully expect this will be a long-term program and that it will take about five years to do all 120 blocks of the district with a combination of annuals and perennials," said Harris.

Scott Endres and Dean Engelmann, co-owners of Minneapolis' Tangle-town Gardens are already busy growing many of the plants that will be used to landscape the downtown area in greenhouses on their local farm near Plato, Minnesota. When the weather warms up, installation of the plants will begin in the downtown core along 1st Avenue, Nicollet Mall, and Hennepin Avenues, as well as Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Streets between First and Chicago Avenues. If all goes as hoped, the program will continue to expand over the next four years.

Seeking a wow factor

Unlike the ubiquitous daylilies and spireas that populate urban medians and fast-food parking lot landscapes and largely go unnoticed by passersby, the DID team's plan for downtown has the kind of "wow" factor that will turn heads, Endres said. In the spring and summer, for example, lush hanging baskets will grace Hennepin Avenue and Nicollet Mall, while a number of striking container gardens captivate the attention of pedestrians and motorists throughout the downtown core. In addition, existing planters along Nicollet Mall will feature perennials and shrubs that offer a mix of bold textures and colors, as well as complementary annuals.

Additional planters will be built to soften the Hennepin Avenue streetscape. "The planters will surround existing tree grates to provide memorable, design-forward plantings and a consistent look along Hennepin," Endres adds. New planters will also be placed all along Fifth, Seventh and Ninth streets.

The design will be consistent throughout the district and will change with the seasons, including winter, when sophisticated handmade hanging spheres, wreaths and garlands will replace baskets on downtown light posts. The wreaths and spheres will be adorned with snowflakes made from birch stems, pine cones, curly willow and ribbons.

With the flowers gone for the season, planters will be home to winter greens accented with red-twigged dogwood stems, white birch and more pine cones. "It's the kind of work we're known for," Endres explains. "And it's a good feeling to be able to implement the vision we nurtured throughout the design process."

For its part, Shakopee-based Arteka will be working on some of the pilot projects that are included in the first phase of the greening program. One effort will involve cutting into existing pavement along Hennepin Avenue and installing perennials, shrubs and some large trees in an effort to start bringing the urban forest back downtown. Arteka will also renovate a median on Washington Avenue near the Milwaukee Road Depot to include more perennial plantings. If the pilots succeed, similar larger-scale projects will be included in future designs.

All of the plants for the program will be chosen with sustainability in mind, said Harris, to help ensure their survival in the less-than-ideal

conditions of the downtown environment where buildings can block rainwater and pavement and other surfaces hold heat. Maintenance and watering will be done by DID employees known as “ambassadors,” who are currently on the street seven days a week helping people with directions, picking up trash, sweeping, removing graffiti and many other things.

Endres is already looking forward to planting time. “We advocate beauty every day in our business by creating memorable and inspiring spaces for our clients,” he said. “The difference with this is that it will be enjoyed by so many, so it’s really an honor to be part of such a revolutionary project.”

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