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Press Release

'Relaunched' City Beautification and Tree Advisory Board meets

Citizen members discuss Nelson Awards, volunteer mowing, tree removal

ARKANSAS CITY, Kan. (July 2, 2015) — The “relaunched” City Beautification and Tree Advisory Board had its second monthly meeting with its new members on Thursday, June 25.

Prior to five new citizens' being appointed to the board by the City Commission in May, the board had just one active member and had become largely inactive.

When the “new” board met in May, City Manager Nick Hernandez sat in as the staff liaison to explain his vision for the board and the city's parks. He informed members they had a \$5,000 budget.

At June's meeting, Hernandez updated the board on the ongoing process of deciding what do with the space formerly occupied by the old Arkansas City Memorial Hospital, north of Wilson Park.

He said the City is waiting to hear back from the V.J. Wilkins Memorial Foundation on whether it will be awarded a grant this year that would help to pay for a master plan for the site and adjacent park.

Board members present June 25 were Kammy Downs, Michelle Dykes, Bob Foster and Candace Stephens, all of whom were appointed in May. This was Downs' first meeting.

The board's other members, Steven Walker and Jill Wineinger, were absent.

The board meets at noon on the last Thursday of each month, except November, which has no meeting, and December, when it meets in the middle of the month because of the holidays.

Its next meeting will be at noon Thursday, July 30 in the city manager's office at City Hall.

Yard recognition awards

For immediate release

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The board decided in May to restart two yard recognition awards that had been given out in years past — the Nelson Sensation Award and the Yard of the Season award.

New yard signs have been created for both honors and will be installed by board members. Three yards were identified as potential award winners in July, according to board secretary Terice Watts.

The Nelson Award, she said, is for “certain people out there who go above and beyond to make their place look as nice as possible. It could be additions, exterior, siding. It’s the property as a whole.”

Yard of the Season focuses more on the yards themselves, especially landscaping and flowers.

“It used to be Yard of the Week, but the reason the previous board changed it to Yard of the Season is so they could incorporate it throughout the whole year, and not just be specified to the summer months,” Watts said. “So those people who decorate for the holidays and go all out for the holidays could also be recognized, and that’s why it was changed to that.”

The board’s decision on which yard will receive the Nelson Sensation Award for July will be announced next week, with the other yards receiving Yard of the Season as a “consolation” award.

“We can do that award weekly,” Watts said of the Yard of the Season honor.

Citizens may nominate a yard for the board’s consideration for either award by emailing the address — and, if they like, a photo — of the yard to Watts at twatts@arkansascityks.org.

Community mowing program

Hernandez pitched the idea in May of starting a community mowing program to assist citizens who are unable or unwilling to mow their property. Mowing would be by residents or volunteers, not the City.

“When it comes to code enforcement, no one’s a winner,” he said in June. “The City’s not a winner. When it comes to tall grass, we can’t get it mowed fast enough for the person who made the call. By the time the 15 to 20 days is over, they’re going to be saying, ‘Why did it take so long to get it mowed?’

“The homeowner who didn’t mow gets a \$100 ticket, and they’re mad at the City for enforcing the rule. The neighbor’s mad because it took so long to get the rule enforced. There are no winners.”

To encourage compliance rather than enforcement, he has proposed soliciting donations of lawn mowers to the City — about 10 would be needed — which would maintain and rent out the mowers as needed. The city could deliver a mower with a signed waiver from the property owner.

The program potentially could cut down on the number of letters sent out by code enforcement, he said, as well as the issuing of tickets to property owners.

Hernandez updated the board on the idea in June, saying he still was working with Tony Tapia, director of parks and facilities, to develop maintenance procedures before the program could begin.

City tree removal

Tree removal has been a hot topic lately among citizens, Hernandez said. He explained to the board the rationale behind the removals — both those that have occurred and those still planned in the future.

"A lot of the property we're cleaning up, it's not just for the heck of it," he said. "There's always a reason." All of the tree removal projects involved volunteer trees, he explained.

Unlike trees that are brought in intentionally and planted on someone's property, volunteer trees usually spring up on their own from seeds deposited on the ground through natural causes or accidental transport. They can be hazards, to themselves and others, on residential, commercial or public property.

For instance, at the Poplar Avenue walking trail, a bunch of volunteer trees and a couple of fruit trees that were dying have been removed, Hernandez said. The City is haying that ground now.

"Prior to the bypass being put in, that was all pristine farm ground anyway," he said. "That's about 20 years' worth of growth, which is pretty significant."

Another case involves Knebler Pond, which Hernandez said wasn't even a pond until 1986.

"Prior to that, it was farm ground, then they dug the sand pit, and in 1994, that was where they dug out all the borrow pits for the bypass," he explained. "We got a large portion of our dirt from that area.

"The trees you see growing in there are from the 1998 flood, which got into all that area and left seeds behind, so those trees you see have grown since the flood."

"It's not healthy to have that many trees that close together," Hernandez added. "You need to thin them out. Yes, there need to be trees there for the shade, but we'll make it so they are healthier trees."

He said the city had cleaned out some volunteer trees around the concrete backstop in the north part of the area due to ongoing criminal activity, including drug use. This was to increase visibility.

Any further tree cleanup at Knebler Pond is "not going to occur overnight, but we'll start working on that the next few years," Hernandez said.

The tree removal north of Presbyterian Manor, 1711 N. Fourth St., was part of an ongoing effort to clean the C Street Canal. The objective was to remove trees that were restricting the flow of water, which was starting to back up in the canal.

Similar cleanups are planned for property between Presbyterian Manor and Westlake Ace Hardware that is owned by Jim Sybrant, because the drainage ditch is backing up and storm water is draining from the Westlake parking lot onto his land, and in the C Street Canal next to First Street.

"The individual who lives on First Street wants us to remove all those as soon as we can because someone went on her property and 'tagged' her house (with spray paint)," Hernandez told the board.

"She thinks they came up the canal and she doesn't feel safe. We were going to remove them anyway, but we're probably going to do that quicker now. I don't ever want anybody not to feel safe."

Eventually, Hernandez said, the entire canal will be cleaned out all the way to the Walnut River.

"We always get dinged by the (U.S. Army) Corps of Engineers on inspection because they want a nice, pristine canal, with nothing to impede its flow," he said. "Plus it looks better and is easier to mow."

The City uses an excavator it purchased since it is the quickest and cheapest way to do the work.

The City also will rent a tree spade this fall to remove several maple trees from behind Kuhn Mechanical, 1001 E. Kansas Ave., so they can be replanted elsewhere, Hernandez said.

Tree purchase opportunity

After discussing tree removal, the board turned its attention to planting new trees, learning it had received correspondence last month from Fourth Grade Foresters, a group that works with tree boards.

Foresters sponsors a tree for each local fourth-grader to take home and plant on Arbor Day, celebrated on the last Friday in April. More than 700,000 such trees have been planted since 2006.

"This year, for the first time, we have a surplus of trees and we need to get them into the hands of anyone willing to plant and care for them," Fourth Grade Foresters states in its letter. It has identified a need for trees in rural Midwest areas to plant windbreaks and in areas affected by storm damage.

Foresters is offering 16-inch to 24-inch Norway spruce trees for just \$1 each, plus shipping. The trees are bare-root 2-year-old seedlings and are packaged individually by workers with disabilities.

Anyone who orders 100 trees will receive an extra 50 trees free of charge. They will be shipped immediately via FedEx for a total shipping cost of around \$15 (for 150 trees).

To purchase trees or for more information, call (402) 429-9722, email fourthgradeforesters@gmail.com or visit www.fourthgradeforesterusa.com.