

Guest Blog: A Community's Creative Roots

Contributed by Rich Lukas & Eric Schwalb
Thursday, 16 August 2007
Last Updated Friday, 17 August 2007

In this entry, Eric Schwalb and I – both residents of 13th Street, SE – would like to give you an update about an exciting new effort sprouting up in our Ward 6 neighborhood.

This past April, Eric sent out a call of interest to his surrounding neighbors, soliciting ideas to create a community garden and park on the empty lot at Kentucky Courts (located at the corner of 13th and C Streets, SE). The response by green-thumbed enthusiasts was overwhelming, and that month residents met to discuss options for improving the lot, which is the property of the D.C. Housing Authority (DCHA). We received input ranging from gardening techniques to landscape design and site functionality to gardening club membership structure. Representatives from the Hill East Community Garden and the King’s Court Community Garden also attended the meeting, giving their words of advice and experiences as a part of the growing list of community gardens that already populate DC. All agreed that a more inviting spot for the residents of Kentucky Courts and the local neighborhood would create a stronger community.

By a stroke of good fortune, less than two weeks later, Councilmember Tommy Wells accompanied by Michael Kelly, DCHA’s Executive Director, came out for a community walk of our Hill East neighborhood. I relayed our recent meeting and the idea for a park and garden, and at once had the enthusiastic interest and commitment of Tommy and DCHA. Equally as fortunate was the support given by Laverne Smith, President of the Kentucky Courts residents council.

The seed had been planted! But would it grow to maturity?

After notifying the neighborhood of our great news, we were even happier to receive an invitation to an official meeting with DCHA at Tommy’s office. At that meeting DCHA committed to improving the empty lot into a garden and park for use by the entire neighborhood. We pushed for a spring 2008 opening, and they indicated that was quite possible. DCHA will work with our ideas and drawings, as well as their own plans to soften other parts of the Kentucky Courts landscape within the community to develop the property. While the “seed” money for the construction would be paid by DCHA, we will be soliciting funding for the site’s promotion and maintenance.

There are of course many details to work out. One is the ownership of the property. One option that is being explored is the ceding of the lot from DCHA to the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation, with that entity then giving a very long term lease to our (by then incorporated) non-profit entity, which will manage and maintain the property. The deed would include restrictive clauses so that the land could not be commercially developed. This is one of the best possible outcomes, and one stressed by DCHA as protecting against future land sales of this public property for some less-desirable private use.

Please mark your calendars for September 12, 2007 at 6:00 pm. A community event will be held that evening, formally announcing the plans for the location. Tommy is scheduled to attend, as are our friends from DCHA and Kentucky Courts. The event will be a kick-off for the project, and will be useful to jumpstart our raising of funds necessary to maintain the property. In the meantime, we will be seeking sponsorship for the food and drink to be served at the event. Please encourage your neighbors to attend and look for more information on this event soon!

Eric and I repeatedly think how fortunate we are to have Tommy’s leadership to guide this process and DCHA’s open-mindedness as our community seeks to create a sustainable garden and park at this site. The ongoing improvements at Kentucky Courts have indeed led it to live up to its namesake as a Jewel on the Hill – and we hope that our efforts to create a socially and environmentally-friendly gathering place at this corner will add to its sparkle.

Please feel free to contact us directly!

Richard Lukas Eric Schwalb
richard.lukas@gmail.com ericschwalb@aim.com