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BENTONVILLE

BENTONVILLE CONSERVATION EFFORTS TAKE ROOT

The city of Bentonville was not at all disappointed in its litter pickup program. But after nine years of taking part in the Great Arkansas Cleanup, Bentonville decided to branch out, literally, when it came to its green initiatives.

With an eye on future generations, Bentonville initiated its tree planting program in conjunction with the national Make a Difference Day promoted by USA Weekend Magazine and Points of Light. The goal was 1,026 by Oct. 26 of last year. In other words, 1,026 trees by 10/26.

Bentonville reached its goal, with help from partners and numerous volunteers. Its efforts, which were replicated this year, made the city a winner in the 2014 City of Distinction Green/Energy Conservation category.

"We were simply looking for a project with a longer lasting impact on the community – good for the environment while making Bentonville a more pleasant place to live," said Shelli Kerr, Bentonville's planning services manager. "We feel strongly that communities with trees are more inviting than those without. If we could plant a large number of trees in one event, the impact would have instant, long-lasting community benefits, leaving a legacy for future generations to enjoy."

The litter pickup was a positive effort that increased community awareness and a feeling of ownership among the residents, Kerr said, but its benefits always seemed to be short-term; it wasn't long before litter would reappear and the areas would have to be picked up again in the spring.

The tree planting program, on the other hand, will

have a lasting value.

"We now have an additional 1,000 trees (and soon to be another 1,000) enhancing the city's aesthetic value," Kerr said. "The benefit of these trees include a cleaner environment, a reduction in the heat island effect, reduced costs associated with storm water runoff, water quality and energy used for heating and cooling, and reduced expenditures on mental and physical health."

"The economic benefits include higher property values and increased consumer spending. Trees are also believed to reduce crime."

Bentonville Community and Economic Development Director Troy Galloway recommended the tree planting, and in discussions the goal was set to have the plantings finished by Make a Difference Day.

The program got a boost last year when Walmart announced a \$25,000 grant toward the purchase of the trees and Scott Eccleston, director of facilities and grounds at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, contributed his know-how to identify planting sites, proper tree species and specific planting locations.

City staff organized volunteers from entities including Crystal Bridges, Walmart, Bentonville Public Works, Bentonville Community and Economic Development, and Bentonville Public Schools who adopted specific sites and provided volunteers.

Weeks of preparation included placing marker flags and having the Public Works Maintenance, Parks and Recreation, and Crossland Construction donating crews and equipment to prepare holes and fill them with mulch.

On Oct. 26, 200 volunteers showed up to plant more than 745 trees representing 18 species. Combined with

earlier plantings, the project's total came to 1,180 trees planted by the deadline.

"The most significant challenge was the coordination of 10 sites, selecting the right trees for those sites, finding a nursery that can handle such a large order, and ensuring that the right trees were delivered to the correct site," Kerr said. "Getting the volunteers was the easy part. ... Because we had very little time to plan the event, everyone involved had an important role to play. Had they not been able to fill their role, the event would not have been successful. We needed everyone's commitment and it showed the day of the event."

This year's event, known as the Annual Tree Planting Blitz, built on lessons learned from last year, Kerr said.

A Friday date was chosen to help gather more corporate support, online registration software was used to manage volunteers and record the number participating. An earlier bidding process, water bags to keep the trees fresh and sponsorship packages are all new wrinkles.

Additionally, Bentonville worked with Plan-It Geo out of Colorado to prepare an urban tree canopy assessment to identify 176,258 planting sites, taking into account such things as wildlife linkages and urban heat islands to prioritize the locations based on their greatest potential benefit.

"We started holding organizing meeting last spring on a monthly basis," Kerr said. "As we got closer to the event date, we met on a weekly basis. We had a project manager that would send out updated spreadsheets regarding sites, site captain, volunteers needed, identified staging areas, and the trees for each site. This kept everyone on the same page." 