

The great outdoors

BH-2 • JANUARY 15, 2007 • SHOPPER-NEWS

By Shannon Carey

They're starting with a vision.

The Beaver Creek Task Force kicked off its initiative to get the Powell Outdoor Classroom up and running with a visioning workshop for Powell High faculty and community members Jan. 8. The task force hopes to extend the success of the Halls Outdoor Classroom to Powell.

Located behind Powell Station Park, the Outdoor Classroom will serve as an extension of the high school for all areas of study. It will also be open to the public, connecting to Powell Station Park.

Much of the area is in Beaver Creek's floodplain, and the main channel of Beaver Creek runs along the classroom's south side. The creek's presence lends valuable biodiversity to the 5-acre site. A mix of forest and meadow opens the site to many possibilities.

The classroom boasts two historic features as well. A pump house from the old Powell water company, now Hallsdale-Powell Utility District, could serve as a gateway building to the site. Also,

deep in the classroom's wooded area, a small train trestle crosses a ravine. The trestle was built with slave labor in the 1840s using bricks from the Powell brickyard.

Led by CAC AmeriCorps volunteers and PHS science teachers, preliminary work has already begun on the site. Several student workdays have focused on removing privet and other exotic invasive plants from the classroom.

Knox County Watershed Coordinator Roy Arthur launched the workshop, saying that a good plan will make the entire process easier.

"We need something concrete to take to the school board," he said. "With a concept plan, we have a much better chance of getting funding for the various projects."

Ruth Anne Hanahan of UT's Water Resources Research Center quoted studies that found that outdoor classrooms are beneficial to students.

"If you use the environment as a stage for learning, the test

scores are going to go up," she said. "Reduced behavior problems and increased test scores."

North Knox Vocational Center agriculture teacher Mike Blankenship was on hand to outline the Halls Outdoor Classroom's pathway to success. He said student and community projects to enhance the classroom have given those involved a sense of ownership.

"I now have freshmen in my class wanting to go check the tree that they planted as a sixth grader. Now, that's community," Blankenship said.

Arthur then turned the floor over to the participants for a brainstorming session. He asked the participants to list goals for the Outdoor Classroom.

The ideas started flowing.

Margaret Massey-Cox said the space should invite the community to Beaver Creek. Barbara Boeing said the classroom could raise awareness of local history.

PHS teachers Amy Williams, Saralee Peccolo-Taylor and Gaynell Gray said the space could be used to showcase student artwork, sculpture projects and performances.

PHS science teacher and fore-runner of the Outdoor Classroom project Rosemary Calvert was full of ideas. She said she wants to use the Outdoor Classroom for hands-on nature learning. Math classes can use it to study triangulation and orienteering. Art classes can use it as a venue for nature drawing. She suggested that the old pump house could be converted into an energy-efficient building to demonstrate concepts like solar panels. Calvert added that the Outdoor Classroom can also promote wildlife as a nature preserve.

Collier suggested that the space could feature birding trails.

The group voiced concerns, too. Calvert said security would be an issue with the Outdoor Classroom due to its secluded location.

"That's a deep space. You can't see it from the street," she said.

Others wondered who would be responsible for maintenance and repairs.

Massey-Cox said the community and the school system should share the responsibility.

"As a community, we need to be responsible for Powell High School just as much as Powell High School is responsible for Powell High School," she said.

Arthur and Hanahan said those issues will be addressed in



Powell High School science teacher Michael Huffman presents his focus group's proposal for the Outdoor Classroom's features.

the project's next steps.

Before the participants broke into small groups, Matt Ledford of Knox County Soil Conservation District and TVA's Melinda Watson made suggestions for the Outdoor Classroom design.

Ledford said the wooded area around the creek could be improved through removal of privet. The forest could eventually become a model for ideal creekside areas. He also suggested creation of wetlands and pocket native gardens. These spaces could be adopted by community organizations.

Watson asked the group to consider all possible uses in the Outdoor Classroom designs, to look at

land contours and conditions.

Participants broke into two groups, one led by Calvert and one led by Michael Huffman, another PHS science teacher. Workshop leaders gave each group pens and a map of the Outdoor Classroom and asked them to rough-sketch features onto the map.

Calvert's group suggested boardwalk trails along Beaver Creek, similar to those along Emory Road in Powell. The boardwalks would allow classroom visitors to enjoy the trails during wet weather as well as dry. They suggested a bird sanctuary and a low-lying amphibian sanctuary, a bird blind and an amphitheater.

Huffman's group came up with many similar elements, including the amphitheater. They suggested running a trailhead up near Powell Station Park's parking lot to encourage community use. They also suggested a pavilion in the center of the space's meadow, sculpture gardens near the historic trestle and picnic tables.

Arthur collected the sketches, saying that Watson and Blankenship would synthesize them into a single plan. After that, Arthur will call another meeting to view the combined plan and make final adjustments. Arthur tentatively scheduled the next meeting for February's inservice day.

In closing, Arthur emphasized that the project should focus on Powell's needs.

"We want this to be driven by Powell High School and the Powell community," he said.