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Project targets decaying Coolidge greenhouse

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Coolidge High School's greenhouse has fallen into ugly neglect over the last 20 years: Peeled paint chips and broken glass from severed windowpanes sprinkle the floor, making it a safety hazard, and students aren't allowed to enter the structure. But James Proctor and other members of the Calvin Coolidge Alumni Association hope to change that.

An unused lawn in front of the withering greenhouse, which was built in 1938, is now a construction site for a classroom garden that will serve as a precursor and eventual complement to a restored greenhouse.

This month, laborers have been hard at work grooming the ground and paving pathways. Proctor, who works in site design and construction for a living, is overseeing the project, which has gained the crucial backing of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Proctor said the idea originally sprang from a construction-oriented mentoring program at Coolidge that challenged students to come up with a hypothetical reconstruction plan. The ACE Mentor Program is a national organization focused on cultivating students' interest in architecture, construction and engineering.

The assignment soon piqued the interest of the Calvin Coolidge Alumni Association, an organization heavily involved in ACE operations at its alma mater.

The association decided that turning the "eyesore" of a greenhouse into a gleaming new facility would be a great way both to improve the school's image and add new educational opportunities for students, Proctor said. That's when the American Society of Landscape Architects came into the picture.

At the prompting of ACE, the landscape-architects group agreed to take a look at the students' proposal. And soon enough, organizers of the society's Legacy Project, which takes on a service-oriented project in the host city of its annual meeting every year, decided the greenhouse plan was just the right kind of undertaking for their 2010 conference in D.C.

But during the fact-finding phase of the project, coordinators ran into a serious problem. They realized they would need funds from the D.C. Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization to complete the effort, and that those funds probably wouldn't be grant-



Bill Petros/The Current

Construction is under way on an educational garden outside the 1938 greenhouse at Coolidge High.

ed until Coolidge's scheduled modernization in 2014. The architects group alone, they judged, wouldn't have quite the wherewithal to complete the project.

Not wanting to squander the architects' support, the alumni association proposed replacing the unused lawn in front of the greenhouse with an educational garden. In conjunction with ACE and the architects group, the alumni soon developed a plan, proposing a master garden encircled by a network of brick pathways that would separate habitat-themed sub-gardens, each of which could be used to teach about a different niche of plant life.

During and leading up to the conference, which took place Sept. 11 through 13, attendees met on the grass lawn in front of the greenhouse and provided or pledged an array of donations for the new garden and the old greenhouse looming above it. Plants, paving, furniture and, perhaps most important of all, pro bono commitments from development professionals were among the gifts, which Proctor said added up to about \$200,000.

Proctor said his alumni association is thrilled that the architects group supplied them with such an abundance of resources, and expect to have the garden up and running by mid-November. But he and other alumni still have one goal they are not about to give up on: restoring the greenhouse as soon as possible.

Though Coolidge is scheduled to undergo modern-

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ization in 2014, Proctor said, it's unclear whether that date refers to the beginning of the construction phase or the beginning of the design phase, a distinction which could mean a difference of up to four years. Proctor is confident that when modernization does begin, the city will implement the greenhouse designs, which officials already approved.

Still, he hopes his alumni organization, with the support and endorsements of ACE Mentor Program and the architects group, will succeed in "conveying that the time is right," and that restoration should begin before modernization.

Successful development of the garden, he said, is a way of proving to the city that his team is effective and that current design plans and proposals for future involvement are sound.

"The garden helps highlight the fact that we can do these things," Proctor said. "The school system doesn't have to do all of the heavy

lifting ... There's a reason that you should do this and do this possibly ahead of time."

Calvin Coolidge Alumni Association members are also hoping the greenhouse and garden will add steam to the school's steady academic improvement and stand as a symbol of its progress. Proctor said completion of the project would raise "everyone's enthusiasm and awareness as to something good is happening at your school."

"The buzz is that we're on the move," he said.

And in less than a month, Proctor and his organization intend to rev it up: On Nov. 6, American Society of Landscape Architects members, various volunteer groups, school staff and the original thinkers behind the project — students — will meet in front of the greenhouse for "Plant-It Day." Participants will transplant a panoply of donated plants into a path-cleaved garden bed. By Nov. 13, the plot will encompass a butterfly garden, a wetland garden, meadows garden, a rain garden and a shrubbery garden — what Proctor calls a true outdoor classroom.

