

Posted on Thu, Aug. 23, 2007

Urban reforestation plan takes shape

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BILOXI -- Forget about architectural blueprints sketching the future of South Mississippi neighborhoods. The professionals gathered in a Biloxi conference room Wednesday and today are focusing on sketching a Greenprint to rebuild local communities.

Over 60 tree specialists and local officials from across the Coast came together to develop a strategic plan for reforestation South Mississippi, a package called a Greenprint. The two-day regional urban forest workshop's goal is to develop the plan that will support Replant South Mississippi, which will populate the Coast with 300,000 native sapling trees.

"All of the input over the next two days will play a great role in moving Replant South Mississippi forward," said Judy Steckler, the director of Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain, which along with The Sun Herald and the Mississippi Forestry Commission hosted the meeting.

South Mississippi's urban forest was being plowed under in the name of development long before Hurricane Katrina came ashore. The storm, though, drew the eyes and support of national groups like The Home Depot Foundation, which sponsored the tree workshop.

Deann Fordham, a program manager with The Home Depot Foundation, said Greenprint's regional model would allow cities to manage their forests how they want, but would also look at needs across the Coast.

"It's not just about the tree," Fordham told the group. "It's about what they represent to a community. We have an opportunity here to show the rest of the country how trees are a valuable part of a city's infrastructure."

Members of the Sacramento Tree Foundation, who created the Greenprint concept and came to the workshop to spread the word, said the value in trees isn't just about making a place look better; a healthy urban forest saves money.

They said 1 million trees can offset \$3.5 million in annual municipal stormwater runoff costs and create \$10 million in annual energy savings. They said that 1 million trees could absorb \$5 million in annual costs to clean up the air in a community, while

just one tree planted in the front yard can increase the sale price of a home by 1 percent.

"We're here to learn and plan together," said Sacramento Tree Foundation's Eric Douglas. The organization has helped increase that area's urban forest to more than 6 million trees. "We're going to figure out how to make what we did in Sacramento work in South Mississippi."

Sun Herald publisher Ricky Mathews said now is the time to embrace an aggressive strategy to rebuild the Coast's urban forest, which is deeply entwined with the area's heritage.

"No one organization can coordinate the recovery effort for the size of the challenge we face," Mathews said. "These trees help create the quality of life - the most important thing we can focus on. We've got some work to do to bring them back."

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