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TOP STORY

More trees going up in Mesa slowly but surely

By Scott Shumaker, Tribune Staff Writer

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The City of Mesa, community partners and volunteers planted trees and shrubs as part of a landscape restoration event on Nov. 14 to bring more shade and environmental improvements to the Superstition Springs Transit Center. (*City of Mesa*)

The City of Mesa has set a goal of nearly tripling the tree canopy covering the city from its currently estimated 6% up to 15% over the next 25 years.

By involving Mesa's youth and other community members in their efforts, city officials and private partners hope to make their tree planting efforts stick.

At a recent tree planting event in Mesa, many said the buy-in by youth is necessary for the effort's longevity.

They say planting and maintaining trees is an ongoing process – meaning the next generation must have the knowledge and desire to maintain trees.

This youth-involved ethic was on full display at the latest tree-planting event with students from Mesa High working with volunteers and city employees to plant 23 desert-adapted trees and 53 pollinator shrubs at the Superstition Springs Transportation Center.

Eventually 108 new trees will be planted at the bus stop hub, perched between the U.S. 60 and the Superstition Springs Mall.

The initial tranche of trees went in on the south side of a wide sidewalk where bus riders wait to catch their buses.

Organizers hope the new trees will create shade for people in an area that has plenty of concrete and the potential to feel like an oven in the summer.

Students from Mesa High's AP Environmental Science class got their hands dirty digging holes for the desert willow and palo blanco trees, and they also made decisions about how to position the young plants.

"Which way do you want it to be seen?" asked volunteer Steve Priebe, a biology teacher at Mesa Community College and former City of Phoenix horticulturist, as he rotated the small tree in different directions.

"That way," a high school girl said, confidently making the decision that will set the position of the tree for generations. The students named the palo blanco Sherman II (after another tree at one of the student's homes also named Sherman).

The students then back-filled rich dirt into the hole and Priebe showed them how to check the root zone for girdling roots that might choke the plant as it grows, clipping a problem root off with a pair of clippers.

Priebe said the palo blanco tree ("white stick" in Spanish) is a Sonoran desert native that looks vaguely like a weeping willow. He said it makes a "good parking lot tree," because the thornless, flexible branches won't scratch people who brush against them.

Mesa High senior and AP Environmental Science student Isa Escoria was among the students planting the trees. She said she “likes seeing the impact” of environmental projects like this.

“I used to come to this mall so much,” she said. “It’s special to see it improved with trees. ... We have so much time ahead of us – improving it now, our future is so much better.”

Isa, who will attend Northern Arizona University next year and plans to major in environmental science, said she backs Mayor John Giles’ goal of getting 1 million trees planted in Mesa by 2050.

“I think it’s a really good goal,” she said. “It not only improves the air quality, it improves property values.”

Mesa budgeted this year for an urban forest program administrator, but the position has not been filled yet. That role might help the city accelerate its tree planting efforts by speeding the creation of a plan to get trees planted in the volumes needed to reach 1 million by 2050.

The cost of the Superstition Springs planting event was underwritten with \$40,000 from Meta, the social media company that is deep into construction on a large data center campus to the south of the mall at Ellsworth and Elliot roads.

Meta partnered with nonprofit Arizona Sustainability Alliance to organize the event, the second time Meta has worked with the organization on a tree planting.

More than just planting trees, the nonprofit aims to help communities “be aware and have some agency in bringing shade canopy and different benefits of trees,” CEO Orlando Cazarez said.

Those gains for the community include “environmental benefits, environmental justice benefits, health benefits, reducing the heat island effect and just providing shelter during the extreme heats in the summers here in Phoenix,” Cazarez said.

As part of its involvement with the planting, Arizona Sustainability Alliance will help to quantify the benefits of the new trees by returning over the next five years to measure the growth, the size of the shade canopy, and the temperature variance inside and outside the shade.

“We’re tracking the impact of all the trees we’re a part of here in the valley,” Cazarez said.

City staff will be responsible for maintaining the trees.

Meta Community Development Regional Manager David Williams said the company partners with Arizona Sustainability Alliance because it wants to support projects that “bring communities together”; he doesn’t want to “cut a check and leave.”

Williams and several other Meta employees were at the event in work clothes to plant trees.

The engagement way is not speedy. Cazarez said AZ Sustainability Alliance has planted 1,500 trees over its six years, mostly in parks and school campuses.

As part of its Trees are Cool initiative, Mesa has created a reporting tool for new trees planted, and since it launched, it’s logged 3,500 new privately owned trees and 1,400 new city-owned trees.

It’s a lot of trees, and the city believes it’s not capturing all the new trees planted, but at 5,000 trees per year, it would take 200 years to reach one million.

Priebe said engaging the public and the youth is important to keeping a tree-planting program sustainable because in some ways planting a million trees is the easy part.

“To keep them alive into the future for the next generation is the challenge,” he said. “We need to be educating the next generation – let kids know the value of keeping trees alive.”