

Silvermont Centennial Committee Report to Brevard City Council: Oct. 21, 2013

Who We Are:

The Silvermont Centennial Committee includes volunteers who have been dedicating their time at Silvermont doing various projects for several years.

We had built new demonstration gardens, turned a deteriorating second floor of the historic mansion into a beautiful museum, cut down and hauled away dead trees, painted a picnic shelter, built new benches, worked on eroding and unsafe paths, treated sick hemlocks, pulled invasive plants.

Before our current team was formed, we were part of other groups who have had paintbrushes, rakes, shovels, hammers and chainsaws in our hands.

We had worked unilaterally getting eager support for our individual projects from more than 100 businesses and more than 1,000 volunteers who have said they care about Silvermont.

What Is Silvermont:

The Silvermont Park property is an 8-acre county park in downtown Brevard anchored by a 33-room colonial revival mansion that is on the National Register of Historic Places.

On your visit to the park, you can wander the ¾-mile trail that winds past a Woodland Garden of native plants; a Learning Garden where vegetables, fruit bushes and pollinator plants grow in season; and a rain garden that manages storm water on the property.

You can see children and their families playing on the tennis and basketball courts, and picnicking. You can learn about Transylvania County history along the Walk of History. You can appreciate the four seasons in the ornamental conifer garden, and look up at the many native trees that have graced the property for as long as 100 years.

You can visit the mansion to participate in a range of classes and activities offered by the Silvermont Opportunity Center.

Or you can walk upstairs to the beautiful museum on the second floor reflecting the era of the original Silvermont family, the Silversteens, who built their home here in 1917, and whose descendents ultimately willed the property to the county.

But without URGENT repairs, essential improvements and regular care, all this is threatened.

So those of us volunteering at the park kept bumping into each other and finally, one day, we lifted our heads up from our individual projects, looked at each other and asked:

What would happen if we worked together?

What would happen if we thought of this place more strategically?

What would happen if our energies were directed at more long-term plans for this property?

So we decided to answer those questions.

Work Started

Our group started work in Jan. 2012. We formed a group we ultimately called the Silvermont Centennial Committee.

Our members represent more than a dozen groups: Friends of Silvermont, Master Gardeners and other garden groups, museum supporters, tennis players, Silvermont Opportunity Center, neighbors, walk of history, historical society, government and business. We tried to reach out to all the Silvermont constituencies.

Our group developed a purpose: To act as a unified leadership team developing and coordinating short-term and long-term goals for Silvermont.

And our vision became this: Silvermont Park is a vibrant community center and historic landmark valued by residents and visitors of all ages for its beauty, history, recreation, education, music and special events.

The words *vibrant* and *valued* are really important.

Yes, there was some vibrancy already here. Yes, the history was valued by some. Yes there was beauty and music and classes and special events.

But not enough. The kind of vibrancy we envisioned means more of all that and much better. It means using and loving the property to its full potential.

It means being valued so much that peeling paint and rotten wood would be unthinkable.

That leaking roofs, falling plaster, eroding pathways, and vagrant hangouts would be unthinkable.

That dying trees, invasive plants killing out native plants, and a picnic shelter with moldy roof and graffiti would be unthinkable.

That basketball courts full of weeds coming up through cracked concrete and goals with no nets would be unthinkable.

So the Committee set out to develop a plan reflecting a standard of excellence and respect that would support a place of beauty true to its history and its place in our community.

Because of all the work we saw ahead of us, we agreed to meet every other week. And so began our investigation of the grounds and house. We walked the property many times. We inspected the house from basement to attic. We brought in experts to help. We assessed everything, looking at strengths, liabilities and opportunities.

The county commission authorized funds to hire an architect to do a Preservation Plan for the House, and to hire a surveyor to do a survey of the property.

Results Of Our Work:

So we took all our data and started developing recommendations.

Ellen Harris of Harris Architects put together the Preservation Plan for the house.

Kathy Zimmerman of Wildwood Design donated her time to put together a Grounds Plan for the landscape and hardscape of the 8 acres.

We divided the work into phased priorities with timetables and costs. Our plan is a 4-phased plan that costs \$2.2 million. Our goal is to complete this project by May 2017 in time for a Centennial Celebration of the historic mansion.

Summary Of Our Recommendations:

Our architect Ellen Harris concluded that: “The historic mansion is in need of repairs to maintain and restore significant historic features and is in need of alterations to meet current code and functional requirements.”

What does that mean? It would include:

- Repairs to front porch and columns, and the side and back porches.
- Repairs to eaves, dormers, windows, shutters, doors and roof.
- New exterior paint.
- Improved and new HVAC for interior, all floors. Currently there is no heat or air conditioning on the second floor for the museum.

- Upgraded electrical service.
- Repair to interior walls and ceilings.
- Upgraded restroom facilities.
- Rehabilitation of third floor with a new elevator addition giving people access to the second and third floors. Now if someone wants to visit the museum, they must be able to climb the stairs.
- New paint for the interior.
- Carriage house repairs and improvements.
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And for the grounds, we are proposing:

- New basketball court in new location.
- New community gathering plaza in front of the mansion.
- New childrens' playgrounds and outdoor adult fitness equipment.
- New park entrance.
- New signage and lighting throughout.
- Repairs and improvements to pathways.
- Repairs to picnic shelter and benches.
- New landscaping around mansion and at the entrance.
- Eliminating invasive plants and caring for hemlocks and other treasure trees.
- Better storm water management.

Our landscape designer Kathy Zimmerman has shown us how wonderful it would be to build a new basketball court in a different park location and convert the open space in front of the mansion to a plaza for all sorts of community activities.

Beautifully landscaped, the plaza becomes a place to stop and sit, to have larger gatherings connected to downtown festivals, to be enjoyed by those having special events at the mansion.

She has done a good job of highlighting how the grounds potential is huge and addresses the consistent call for more urban park area in the city.

What Else Has Happened:

- We presented our recommendations to the county commissioners in April 2013.
- The county commissioners released \$200,000 from the Silvermont Reserve Fund to be used on mansion repairs.
- Bids were taken in October for porch and other mansion repairs.

- Tennis courts were resurfaced, thanks to former Parks & Recreation Director Rick Pangle and the county commissioners.
- Our board has hired a professional trail builder to do an ADA Trails plan for the park.
- Our group is working on fundraising strategies.

Why Silvermont Park:

So with so many community needs and projects being considered by so many in our community and government, why Silvermont Park and why now?

We'd like to suggest 5 reasons:

1. This is a place that represents a piece of our heritage, our history. It provides context for part of the story of Brevard and Transylvania County.
2. This is a place that has been entrusted to us. It was a gift. Don't we owe it respect and care?
3. We hear a lot about quality of place and quality of life. Isn't a beautifully maintained park a reflection of what we mean? And wouldn't it reflect poorly on the sincerity of our claims if it continues to decline and fall into disrepair?
4. This is a place located just 5½ blocks from the intersection of Main and Broad. It is highly visible and an important part of the city of Brevard.
5. It is 8 acres of green space within walking distance of many neighborhoods at a time when people in our community are asking for more space for outdoor activity. They are asking for space for community gathering and connection. Silvermont Park can provide that.

In May 2017, when the mansion turns 100 years old, we want it and the grounds it sits on to truly represent the values of the people of Brevard and Transylvania County.