

Zenger Farm: the last urban agricultural outpost

COMMENTARY BY KATHY HEMPHILL



As part of every one of its annual conferences, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) implements a legacy project in partnership with a local nonprofit implementing green building practices. For GreenBuild 2004, the legacy project is the renovation of Zenger Farm -- one of the last operational farms in the Portland city limits.

In 1994, the City of Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) purchased Zenger Farm, a 16-acre site located in the eastern portion of the Lents Urban Renewal District in outer Southeast Portland. The farm was originally part of a 40-acre parcel owned by Jacob Johnson in the 1800s. After Johnson, a series of owners operated the property as a farm. That included the Zengers, who bought the property in 1913 to run the Mt. Scott Dairy. The land contains a 10-acre wetland with a spring that is one of the primary sources of water for nearby Beggar's-tick marsh. Because the property's northern boundary abuts the Springwater Corridor, it also provides key recreational opportunities.

At the time of purchase, the City's interest in the land was primarily to manage the floodplain for the Johnson Creek Watershed. A year later, BES entered a lease agreement with Urban Bounty Farm for the farmland portion of the property, to provide educational opportunities for local schools and youth programs. Soon citizens and organizations came together to further explore the potential. The outcome of the effort was the 1999 incorporation of Friends of Zenger Farm. Its mission is to preserve the urban farm and wetlands to promote sustainable food systems, environmental stewardship, and local economic development.

The Friends are well on the way of moving their vision forward. They have signed a 50-year lease with the City of Portland and plan to offer a variety of programs. Zenger Farm hosts about 600 school children a year, provides low-income families with vegetables, and gives farming plots to immigrants who farm for their own subsistence and sell their extra produce at a local farmer's market.

But Zenger Farm doesn't have the facilities to accommodate demand. The current farm complex includes a 120-year-old house, milk house, barn, garage and garden shed. Space is needed for an on-site office, a caretaker, and a classroom to complement the hands-on education outside. The Friends are raising money to transform the site into the Zenger Urban Agricultural Park, with a two-phased plan for improvements.



Students scramble for pumpkins at Zenger Farm, the 16-acre site picked at the GreenBuild 2004 Legacy Project.

Phase one includes redevelopment of the farmhouse to provide office space, indoor classrooms and bathroom facilities, as well as a permeable driveway and street improvements for stormwater management. To kick things off, David Evans and Associates Inc. held an interdisciplinary charette and cost-benefit analysis to assure sustainable development potentials are being maximized.

Phase two improvements include two new buildings: a welcome center and a passive heated/cooled classroom with an attached greenhouse added to the west end of the property. The classroom will also contain a demonstration kitchen for community cooking and food-preservation courses. The buildings will possess "green" features, including heavy insulation, solar panels providing heat and electricity, and cisterns to catch water for irrigation. Finally, interpretive trails and signs that connect the farm with the Springwater Trail will be added.

The farmhouse remodel, designed by architect Erez Russo, began in September and will include a community work party prior to the GreenBuild conference in November.

The Friends plan to rely on local talent, volunteer labor, and several local partners, including BES, the Portland Development Commission, the City of Portland's Office of Sustainable Development, Meyer Memorial Trust, to bring their vision to fruition. The nonprofit hopes the new Zenger Farm will tie together historical conservation, green building, agricultural and ecological education, and neighborhood revitalization.

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