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Botanic Garden prepares to grow a new garden site

By Sarika Jagtiani
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The strenuous process of turning 452 acres of raw land into an elaborate series of gardens will begin with the strike of a shovel.

The Botanic Garden of Western Pennsylvania will step away from fantasy and toward reality when the Horticultural Society of Western Pennsylvania breaks ground on the future garden's site in Oakdale on Tuesday. The site for the new garden is on 452 acres near the southern end of Settler's Cabin County Park.

It couldn't be sooner for Lindsay Totten, president of the Botanic Garden of Western Pennsylvania, who has been planning for this event for 15 years.

Exciting funding news, which won't be released until Tuesday, prompted the groundbreaking, Totten says, because it meant they could stop waiting and start digging.

"It's (now) more of a question of when, not if," there will be a garden, she says.

The groundbreaking will kick off three years of environmental cleanup, soil amendment and a major fundraising campaign.

The \$30 million Totten hopes to raise will fund the garden's first of three building phases. The first phase will include, in part, construction of the visitors' center and some visitors' parking, as well as children's, parterre and hanging gardens.

Once completed, Totten says the Botanic Garden will draw more visitors to what some would consider the garden's competition: Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens.

"We are convinced ... that it will complement what Phipps is doing and bring more people from out of town," she says.

Phipps' executive director Richard Piacentini agrees.

"I think eventually, once the garden has met its full potential, it will give people more reason to come to Pittsburgh," says Piacentini.

While both Phipps and the botanical garden likely will compete for funding, Piacentini doesn't foresee a problem. There always are other groups looking for funding, and the Botanic Garden just is one more.

"If it's not A, it's B; if it's not B, it's C," he says.

Large-scale projects, such as the Botanic Garden, often benefit from private funding, says Ruth Ann Spears, director of Cincinnati's Krohn Conservatory.

"You're competing for the same dollar, but it takes a champion to take that project to fruition," she says of the battle for funding between botanical gardens and conservatories.

Spears says having more than one botanical attraction in a city just makes it more appealing to young retirees with money to travel.

"We're stronger together than either of us will be alone," says Totten of the Botanic Garden and Phipps.

Pittsburgh is one of the few cities of its size not to have a botanical garden, according to Totten.

Cincinnati, a city of 308,728, according to the 2005 census population estimate, is close behind Pittsburgh in population (316,718) but ahead in the fact that it has both botanical gardens and a conservatory.

Spears is confident the Botanic Garden only will add to Pittsburgh's appeal.

"It's another great little star in Pittsburgh's little hat," she says. "I truly feel it will be an economic boost."

The Botanic Garden is expected to bring plenty of green to Pittsburgh in the forms of jobs and money, according to a study by Downtown's Tripp Umbaugh economic impact researchers.

Researchers say that within 10 years of opening, whenever that might be, the Botanic Garden is expected to generate \$38 million in direct economic impact for Allegheny County and the surrounding region.

Of that money, about two-thirds is expected to end up in the green industry, which includes businesses such as landscaping companies and nurseries. The other one-third of the \$38 million is expected to end up in tourist-related businesses.

The Botanic Garden also is expected, after being up and running for 10 years, to bring about 1,180 jobs to the area, mostly in the green and tourism industries.

Totten says that botanical gardens have tremendous power to bring sales of green goods and services, as well as jobs, to the area. Although the Botanic Garden might not sell goods directly, visitors may see things they would like emulated and hire green service providers to copy their favorite sites.

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