

Project Name: Venice Nursery / Garden, Resource Center – 2/1/2009
Applicant: James Murez, on the behalf of the VNC, Beautification Committee
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Overview:

The Venice Neighborhood Council (VNC) will empower the community by creating a Venice Nursery and Garden Resource Center. The center will unite stakeholders through the common interest of gardening, while beautifying the landscaped open spaces in Venice. An education component will provide social events for volunteers on a regular schedule, while a jobs program will hire and train local at-risk individuals, giving them the opportunity to take ownership and pride in their community while performing a valuable benefit for all stakeholders and visitors of Venice. Through these accomplishments, the participants will do what the City has been unable to do thus far, namely maintain the green open space areas of our neighborhoods.

The ideal site for this project is 520 Venice Way. This location is at the intersection of Venice Blvd. just a few blocks from the beach. It is along the primary route of traffic leading to the beach attractions. With the Venice Library, Centennial Park and the Venice Farmers' Market all clustered in this area, the site has a lot of visitor exposure. Both public bus routes and dedicated bike lanes intersect here as well. The project will utilize this site to create a nursery that will serve as a resource center for the materials, equipment, volunteers and at-risk workers and a demonstration garden while providing a vital cost saving element (described below) that will allow the project to succeed.

Although the work site for this project is all of the Venice community, the largest landscaping area we intend to address is the Venice Blvd. right-of-way, a stretch of roadway from Lincoln Blvd. west to Pacific Ave. The right-of-way landscape areas include the medians, parkways and intersection islands. The 520 Venice Way Resource Center is centrally located within this primary work site.

The project funding will be provided through donations from stakeholders and the City. At the end of a two-year pilot term, the community will determine if the established values are beneficial enough to make the program a permanent community asset.

The project description is easier understood by dividing it into two basic parts: the Nursery Resource Center and the landscape maintenance that will be performed throughout the community.

Background: The 520 Venice Way site is an ideal location for a nursery resource center. It is located within the project's primary landscape geographic region, an area defined as the Venice Blvd. right-of-way between Lincoln Blvd. and Pacific Ave. This area is approximately 3.5 acres, which include the median,

landscape buffers and traffic islands. The area has been defined as the “Ceremonial Gateway” to Venice. Other locations that will benefit from the Resource Center include the Venice Canals, Windward Circle and the landscape triangle at Rose and Main Avenues in addition to many of the tree lined streets west of Lincoln Blvd.

A brief history of the primary site is required to better understand the scope of the work to be done. In the early 1990’s, the City opted to take control over Venice Blvd. west of Lincoln Blvd. from the State. At the time, this section of roadway was known as State Highway 187. It had been neglected for over 50 years and needed to be realigned to be compatible with the current community needs. In a hurry-up and get started process, the City failed to include a landscape plan in what was to become the new configuration.

After the completion of the realignment by the City and the State, the site was bare of any landscape. The City had no funds to do this work, nor a vision of what should be done. So the Venice Action Committee (VAC), a local activist group, stepped up and applied for funds to undertake the landscaping. The application effort was led by James Murez and funded by Caltrans through Assembly Bill 472. The funding provided the VAC with money to plant trees under a program that was designed to mitigate the traffic impacts created by the improved roadway.

The first task for the VAC was the creation of a landscape plan to be approved by Caltrans, the City and Venice residents, property owners and businesses. Although much of this work was started by the California Coastal Conservancy, who conducted community workshops in the mid 1980’s and identified Venice Blvd. as the “Ceremonial Gateway” to Venice Beach, several design considerations and revisions were made in public meetings before a plan was finally approved.

The project, which lasted for three years of plantings and five years of required maintenance, included installing 650 trees along Venice Blvd. and another 750 in the surrounding streets, parks and schools. The project was one of the greatest successes funded through AB-472. Over 4000 volunteers helped install the trees during the planting phase of the project. For three consecutive years, the project hired and trained dozens of youth-at-risk about landscaping. But the community interest dissolved as political turmoil between the City and the community grew over the evaporation of promised City funding.

The original project was never completed, and much of the ground cover landscaping remains uninstalled. Furthermore, in the years that followed, the City contracted out the landscape maintenance to a private company, True Green. This company, besides having no understanding of the City approved landscape plans (the community vision) for Venice, has their workers repeatedly over-trim the plants, which causes them to die. They do not install replacement

plants for those they have destroyed, nor do they repair broken tree-well covers or replace damaged trees. They get paid to “mow and blow” the grass and leaves. These work habits must end if the community wants the Venice urban landscape to flourish.

Description: For the purpose of definitions, a “volunteer” is anyone from the community who offers their time to the project free of charge. The term “worker” refers to hired labor which, for the most part, will be at-risk individuals recruited through Venice 2000, a local non-profit group.

Through the City sponsored Adopt-a-Median program, the Department of Public Works will turn over control of the landscape maintenance on Venice Blvd. to the community. However, to make it affordable for the community to undertake this work, the Resource Center must be created. The center will provide more than forty percent of the required funding to make this project a success. This cost reduction will come from the fact that required plant materials will be cultivated at this site, rather than having to purchase them from a wholesale nursery.

For the community Nursery to operate effectively and successfully, the proper atmosphere will need to be created. This includes adding a water meter to the site, along with power that can run a drip watering system. The workers will be taught how to set up and maintain the watering system. The power for the system will be developed by a demonstration solar system with battery backup to keep the timer running.

A restroom and storage shed will also be required. The shed will be used to store the various hand tools and other items of value. No sewer line exists on the site at present, so a permit from Building and Safety will have to be obtained. With the help of the Council Office, the cost of the permit should be able to be waived. The cost of the water meter installation will be funded by private fundraising efforts and is estimated to be in the area of \$3000. The material costs to construct the restroom will also be funded by private funds. The construction of the structures will be done by the paid workers, under the supervision of a licensed contractor.

The design for the restroom and shed will be proposed by a local architect. The guidelines will be to create something functional and environmentally correct. The solar panels that provide the electric for the site will be mounted on the roof. The gray water from the hand washing sink (if approved) will be recycled into watering the plants. The structure will be documented as part of the documentation describing the project. Several local architects have already indicated interest in volunteering their efforts for this design.

One cost that is involved with a landscape maintenance project like this is the expense of plant materials. The plants that were chosen by the community for the project area are drought tolerant native species, which carry a slightly higher

cost than common nursery plants. Although these plants are scarce to most commercial nurseries, they possess qualities that make it possible for our project to propagate them in a nursery environment. At present, to complete the original landscape design, about five hundred plants made up of about ten to twelve species need to be installed. The cost of purchasing these materials has been estimated at around \$35,000.00. For this reason, we are proposing to raise the plants through a propagation process known as plant division.

The propagation process starts by digging up some of the larger established plants that are already installed in the medians. The plants will then be returned to the Nursery, where they will be carefully divided into dozens of smaller individual plants. These smaller plants will then be planted in plastic pots, where they will be cared for until they become established. The plastic pots with the seedlings will be stacked on shelves (much like bakery racks) to save space in the Nursery. After a few months of regular feedings and water, the plants will be returned to the medians where they are needed to fill out the landscape plan. This process will continue as long as the project is running, since replacement plants are always needed.

The project will involve performing several mini beautification projects. These mini projects will include going through the community and repairing or removing tree well covers, planting missing trees and pruning low hanging tree limbs. Some of the target streets include Main St., Abbot Kinney Blvd., Rose Ave., 6th Ave., Vernon Ave., Venice Way, Garfield Ave. and Coeur d'Alene. In addition, there are people on several streets that never received trees that would like them now to be planted so, provided there are funds and time available, the project would take on leading these events.

On the days when volunteer events are occurring, the hired workers will help by moving materials to the sites where the volunteers will gather for work. This connection between volunteers and the workers will help unite these sometimes distinct and separate communities.

The process of removing tree well covers is a heavy task that involves disposing of concrete. Two or more workers with large hammers and pry bars must carefully remove the covers without damaging the tree. Sometimes this requires a lot of skill and passion since the trees have grown around the opening of the cover. Consequently, time must be taken to not damage the trees. Once removed, the concrete may be broken up and hauled away. A truck will be used to accumulate the broken material and then driven to the special concrete recycling center. Because the truck will need to be rented for this task, a focused effort will be made to perform this task in consecutive days. This is strenuous work that volunteers will not want to participate in. The truck will also be used to replace the void left behind from the tree well cover being removed by hauling decomposed granite, that will be compacted into the area around the surface and leveled to a depth flush with the sidewalk.

Several streets that were planted in the 1990's have dead trees, so these streets will be the first to be planted. Before the replacement tree can be planted, however, the existing tree stump must be removed. At present, there are about a dozen trees that fall into this category of needing to be replaced. The equipment required to grind out the stump is very special and best run by someone very experienced. For this reason, the project will subcontract out this work to LA City, Department of Street Trees. Once the stump is removed, our workers will replace the missing tree. Following the replacement, we will also have to water the tree until it becomes established. The watering cycle requires 15 gallons of water ever few weeks for the first several years. Unless other water is available, a water tank trailer will be rented to provide water to these trees. Also, since the term of this project is only two years, this work will need to be done fairly early on in the overall project to insure these trees get enough water to become established before the term expires.

Tree stake removal or repair is another task the project will undertake throughout the community. A tree stake is installed when the trees are young to help support and protect them. Once the trees are established, these stakes should be removed to allow for proper growth. Besides pulling out the stake, which is in the ground several feet, the hole left behind once the pole is pulled out must be backfilled to prevent trash and disease from entering the tree's root system. On the other hand, if the stake is still required, but has been damaged, or the support sling that goes between the tree and the pole is missing or too tight, these conditions will be corrected. Many of the tree stakes that were installed in the 1990's still exist today and should be removed.

Tree pruning is something everyone in the community wants. The City is on a 20+ year cycle, meaning they may not make it to Venice for a long time. The equipment and manpower required to prune the entire tree is beyond the initial scope of this project. However, this does not limit our ability to raise the bottom of the tree, which will make the sidewalk experience much more pleasant for pedestrians. The tools used to perform this work are all hand operated and the volunteers or hired workers never leave the ground – not even on ladders. So the risk of injury is low.

Once the low hanging limbs are removed, they will be returned to the Resource Center where this plant material will be run through a power tool known as a chipper. The chipper will grind up the limbs and leaves into a very valuable mulch material. The mulch will then be given away to community members for their personal gardens or used to fertilize the trees and plants in the medians of Venice Blvd. On the days when trees are being pruned, a truck will be rented to move the trimmed material back to the Resource Center.

Should the project receive grant or large donation funds, purchasing a manlift truck for tree trimming will become an option. However, this sort of expense will depend greatly on the success of the overall project.

The project will create an electronic inventory of all the trees within the public space of Venice Blvd. west of Lincoln Blvd. Each tree will be captured by a digital camera and cataloged into a database. The database will include the date of the photo and the location (GPS Latitude & Longitude) of the tree for mapping geographical reports. As services are performed on the trees, the database will be updated to reflect what was done and, in some cases (like tree trimming), a before and after picture will document the work. The database will be available online. Through user access controls, some individuals will have the ability to post new information, while the general public will be restricted to read-only rights. The Adopt-A-Tree program described below in the budget section of this proposal will be directly tied into this tree inventory system.

By adopting this proposal, the Resource Center at this high exposure location will be a great enhancement for the Outreach, Education and Neighborhood committees by connecting stakeholders through gardening, a passive yet often expressed form of relaxation. The site at 520 Venice Way will serve the community by providing a storage location for gardening tools and event materials (trees, soil amendment, tree support stakes, etc.). It will provide a secure location where rented or purchased equipment can be housed when not in use.

Participants: The following community stakeholders have committed to spearhead the initial term of this project. Each of them brings unique talents to the project. Although other individuals will be recruited to participate, this will be the core group that will make all the decisions and carry the responsibility for the project. These members include: James Murez, project lead, Cynthia Rogers, administrator, Nora Dvosin, master gardener and education coordinator, Stan Muhammad, personnel coordinator and Andy Lipkis, expert advisor. Together these individuals have extensive outreaching connections into the local and environmental communities. They will work as a team to achieve our vision.

Budget: It is clear that all the monies to run an ongoing program like this are not available today. The funds required will need to be raised on a continuous basis. Several mechanisms will be used, including receiving funding from the City, donations from the community and grants.

Plant Materials - \$10,000
Gardening Tools - \$500
Restroom / Storage Shed - \$3000
Water Meter - \$3000
Solar System - \$5000
Nursery Irrigation, timer - \$300

Insurance - \$3000
Labor – \$180,000 (see below)
Fundraising - \$25,000
Equipment Purchase or Rental – Unknown at this time

Funding the labor is going to be the largest single cost and will require an ongoing effort that will regulate the scope and growth of the project. The estimated direct cost for labor ranges from a starting rate of \$8.50 to \$12 per hour per individual. If a separate supervisor becomes necessary, the labor cost for this person might get as high as \$15 per hour. If we then calculate the cost of labor for one year of work, we come to an estimated \$17k to \$24k per person, not including the added rate of a supervisor.

Assuming the labor force is made up of three workers and one supervisor, we need to plan for a labor cost of around \$1,800 per week. This amount does not include any of the overhead or administration needed to run the program, which must also be considered at somewhere around 30-40% of the direct cost.

After making these extended labor costs on a weekly basis, it becomes obvious why an ongoing funding effort will be required for this project to succeed. The labor figure shown in the budget reflects the total outlay if the project is fully funded for the entire pilot term of two years. Any shortfall in fundraising will reduce the scope of the project. Here is the basis of the labor total.

(Hourly Rate X Hours = Weekly Cost)
Supervisor: \$15 x 40 = \$600
Worker: \$8.50 x 40 = \$340 to \$12 x 40 = \$480
Extended for a year: 17k to 24k +30k

All required equipment will be purchased or leased.

The line item Fundraising includes the direct costs required to develop a donation shopping cart website. The website will have several costs related to secure hosting since it will be accepting credit card donations. The development and design costs will be donated services where possible.

The website will facilitate the Adopt-A-Tree program, where individuals can purchase a commemorative plaque and dedicate a tree. Furthermore, the website will be designed to take support donations and send out “Thank you for your support” eCards.

The remainder of the fundraising costs will go into hosting gala events. To the greatest extent possible, refreshments will be received by donations. The events will be announced to the entire extended community. The first gala event needs to generate at least \$50,000 for the project to succeed past the first six months. Additional gala events will be created annually. The galas will honor one or more

prominent individuals in the community. Awards will be made for their environmental contributions and civic leadership.

The City at present spends thousands of dollars with a company called True Green to “maintain” the medians on Venice Blvd. The labor crew now doing this work includes two workers spending about four days a month. The area they work includes the medians east of Abbot Kinney Blvd.. In addition, the Department of Recreation and Parks has a crew that is spending three days a week west of Venice Way maintaining the landscape areas around the parking lots and a separate crew that works in Centennial Park.

Once this project is underway and the Adopt-A-Median agreement is in place, the City will no longer have some or all of these landscape maintenance expenses. Because they use three crews to perform the current services, we intend to scale our efforts to coincide with each of these areas. This should allow us to gear up our staff and the services we provide. As our services come on line, we will ask the City for supplemental funding based on the reduction of the services they have to provide as a result of our efforts.

Cash Flow: The startup costs will be covered by monies previously donated to the VAC Trees Project. These funds will allow the tree well covers to be removed, the propagation plantings to be started and the replacement trees to be installed.

Following the initial startup, funding will be generated through new grants and donations. The donations will be received from the online donation system described in this proposal and from individuals at the Greening of Venice Gala Kickoff Party. Although we are hopeful the City will supplement a portion of the costs, we do not anticipate they will meet all of our funding needs. For this reason, fundraising and volunteer efforts will be an ongoing task for the life of this project.

Cost Analysis: It is difficult to project the benefits achieved on strictly a cost basis since so much of the value of this project deals with community empowerment and giving local volunteers a greater stake in their environment. Since the City will not release any information related to existing landscape maintenance contracts they have for Venice Blvd., we have no reference for comparison. Therefore, the financial benefit we are projecting is based strictly on the cost savings we will achieve through our efforts of recycling plant materials rather than purchasing new from a commercial nursery.

There were three quotations made in 2004 to provide labor and dumping expenses of tree well covers, replacement tree plantings and installation of missing plants as specified on the median landscape plans for Venice Blvd. These estimates ranged between \$260,000 to a high of about \$360,000. This amount did not include any ongoing maintenance.

Term: The initial term of the project will be two years. One hundred and twenty (120) days prior to the end of the term, the VNC will start the process of concluding or extending the project. If the project is to be terminated at the end of the short term, any outstanding materials or equipment will need to be disposed of and the site cleaned up, with all trash and debris removed, and returned to its original condition.

Assuming the project is a success and the community desires to continue it for an extended period of time, a long-term written understanding with the City will need to be obtained. One of the key issues to consider at that time will be the redirection of funds from the City to the community for the service being provided. Other items to consider will be the creation of a committee to manage the project and its funding.

Long Term Goals

A long-term goal would be to create a hydroponic vs. conventionally grown vegetable garden involving students from the local schools, such as Venice High, Mark Twain Middle and Westminster and Coeur d'Alene Elementary schools in an experimental science project. The hydroponic garden will be placed in a visual location at the Resource Center, where beachgoers can view it. An informational sign will describe the demonstration and give credit to the science classes that are participating. Assuming the solar electric power system has ample power to energize a web cam, a time lapse video will be created of the vegetables growing. A website will be created that credits the students and shows prior results from years passed. Awards will be given to students, classes and schools for their involvement. This activity will introduce to the next generation of stakeholders our community greening concepts and activism and serve as a communications outreach to Venice.

Another long term project might include adding a public shower to the Resource Center and using the run-off water for plants in the Nursery. The water would need to be filtered for bacteria and to remove beach sand, but the process could be monitored and display some of the many ways energy efficient designs can be used around the average house.

An additional long term goal for the project could be branching out to provide additional public services where the city has fallen short. One such area is sidewalk cleaning, a service that is needed for all of the streets in Venice that endure a high impact from visitor servicing uses.

Permits: This project will require several permits from the City. The landscaping permits for Venice Blvd. only need to be renewed, while the site improvement plans will require new permits to be issued through Building and Safety. The Councilman will be asked to have the costs of these permits waived.

An Adopt-a-Median application will need to be completed for the Department of Public Works. There are no costs involved with the application, although proof of insurance and other project related issues will have to be addressed.

Materials: The materials for construction of a restroom will be donated or purchased from a local lumber yard. The solar power system parts will be donated through LADWP or purchased from local suppliers. Plant containers, gardening tools and equipment will be purchased through a wholesale nursery supply company. All materials will be readily available off-the-shelf inventory and there will be no custom or long lead items purchased.

Schedule: The timing of this project is subject to the seasons and the growing cycles of plants. The plant division process will obtain the highest degree of success if transplanting occurs while the plants are in a dormant stage. The plants are in a no-growth dormant stage in late Fall through Winter. Therefore, digging up the mature plants and dividing them into hundreds of individual small seedlings will be the first task this project will embark on. This assumes the Nursery will be operational to some degree, even if a temporary watering solution must be utilized.

Before the heat of summer kicks in, replacement tree plantings throughout the community will occur. These trees will require bi-weekly watering. This watering will be performed by pulling a water tank trailer behind a truck or retrofitting a pickup with a large storage tank.

The next task will depend on the condition of the Nursery. If additional work is required to make the Nursery more functional, time will be spent here first. Once this is done, the tree well removal process will start. During the time the tree well covers are being removed and dumped, the seedling plants will be growing and becoming established in their plastic pots. With over 300 tree well covers to be removed, we are estimating the Summer months will be used for completing this work.

In late Fall and early Winter, the seedlings which have been growing in the Nursery for the last several months should be ready for planting. This will kick off several volunteer events that will allow the community to do some fun gardening work. Of course, the watering cycle of the newly installed plants will be high at first, but should drop off drastically once the rainy season starts, and it will then be cut back.

During the Fall and early Winter months, tree pruning will also occur. The cut materials will be returned to the Nursery, where they will be chipped into mulch. The mulch in turn will then be returned to the planting areas, where it will be spread out to reduce weed growth and add nutritional organic material to the soil.

In subsequent years, the Fall and Winter months will be used for plant trimming, tree pruning and plant division. The Spring months will be used for planting and the Summer months, when it is too hot to plant, will be used for hardscape maintenance.

Quarterly events, which will be held on Saturdays, will take volunteers into the community to perform landscaping services on public property. The services will include ground cover installation, tree plantings, plant maintenance and tree care, often in the form of light pruning. Volunteers will be recruited for the events and trained by persons expert in the field the day of the event.

The volunteer events will provide an opportunity for the VNC Outreach Committee to contact stakeholders by making announcements of these party-like events. Afterwards, Outreach will again have the opportunity to contact the stakeholders by announcing the success of the event and recognizing the achievements in the form of awards for activism.

Onsite at the Resource Center, events will also be conducted that include teachings about plant propagation and care, recycling and mulch. Children from local schools will be involved with seedling plantings. The center will serve as a home base where materials and tools will be stored and a place where the hired workers will report for work.

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