

# Holbrook-Palmer Park Event Garden

## A Brief History

October 5, 2021

### Background

The 2005 Holbrook-Palmer Park Landscape Master Plan called for improvements to the Civic Core. The Civic Core was defined as the spaces around the Main House and other structures (Pavilion, Water Tower and Carriage House). The envisioned improvements entailed designing a variety of integrated new outdoor rooms that included an Event Garden. The Event Garden would be central to and connect both the Main House and Pavilion and expand the garden and gathering space experiences associated with these buildings. The Holbrook-Palmer Park Foundation (the Foundation) decided to fund the design and construction of this space in January, 2013. The design vision is summarized in Appendix A.

At the Atherton City Council meeting of May 15, 2013 Community Services Director Mike Kashiwagi reported to the Council the recommendation of the Park and Recreation Committee that the Foundation proceed with the design phase of the Event Garden. The Council approved the project in concept, requiring that the project go through the usual formal approval processes. It was recommended that the Town and Foundation enter into a funding agreement whereby the Foundation would cover project cost, management and changes. Upon completion of construction and acceptance by Town of Atherton, ownership of the Improvements would be donated as a gift from the Foundation to Town of Atherton and subsequently owned by Town of Atherton.

### Event Garden Plan and Construction

From its members and others in the Town the Foundation solicited comments on details of a plan. A landscape architect, Freeman Jewell, was retained to develop plans, specifications and estimates for the purpose of soliciting bids from landscape construction companies. A draft of the plan was submitted to the Town in October, 2014 requesting permission to construct and install any and all of the grading, landscaping and physical improvements shown on the plans. Permission to proceed with the project, defined in exhibits (not included here) was granted by the Town. Terms and Provisions of the Agreement between the Town and the Foundation are summarized in Appendix B.

The Foundation solicited bids from three landscape construction companies. Only one bidder, Frank and Grossman (FG), responded. A contract between the Foundation and FG for demolition of the existing space, amounting to removal of trees and rough grading of the site, was signed in October 2015. Work began immediately including preservation of some architectural features and transfer of the roses to the new rose garden site. Demolition was completed in December, 2015. An amended contract for the finished Event Garden was signed between the Foundation and FG. The approximate cost of the entire project, including architect fees, demolition and finished grading, planting and irrigation was \$230,000,

The Town contributed \$8000 to include electrical service that was not part of the Foundation’s plan. Members of the Foundation contributed about \$8000 to purchase large specimens of black oaks, the major tree in the event garden.

The project was scheduled for substantial completion about the end of February, 2016. Rainfall in the winter of 2015-2016 was unusually heavy. Soon after work began in January, 2016 the site was flooded, as shown below (January 6, 2016). Grading, soil preparation and planting were not possible.



FG attempted to work during dry intervals as shown below (February 18, 2016).



The work could not proceed smoothly due to flooding from late storms as shown below (March 7, 2016).



In response to questions from the Town regarding slow progress that might interfere with planned Spring or Summer events in the Main House or Pavilion, a letter from the Foundation to the Town Manager was sent on January 27, 2016 explaining that construction was significantly delayed due to weather. The contractor and architect deemed it unwise to plant in saturated soil, as shown above. The project was delayed further when very late rainfall revealed drainage did not comply with County mosquito abatement regulations. Drainage problems, especially at the portion of the garden adjacent to the playground, persisted into April, 2016. A soils engineer was retained to provide independent assessment of soil conditions in the planting beds and to recommend remediation. As a result some remediation was performed by FG and a new drain was installed. The history of poor drainage and compacted soil, especially on the west and south sides, suggests that these problems may remain. If so, development of the Event Garden will be hindered unless there is further remediation.

#### Transfer of the Event Garden to the Town

The Foundation retained management of the Event Garden until October, 2016 during which time the health of plants covered by the contractual warranty was monitored. On October, 31, 2016 the Town formally accepted the Event Garden, including almost all maintenance responsibility. The Foundation retained only responsibility for pruning the black oaks for 4 years.

During the interval between completing construction and transferring to the Town, the Foundation advised Town staff in the strongest terms to retain a landscape contractor competent to manage a refined garden space. Foundation warned staff that MCE, the current contractor, lacked the knowledge to maintain the garden. The warnings were not heeded. Over the last 5 years the Event Garden, the condition of the plants and overall appearance of the site have steadily deteriorated. Several of the black oaks died and were removed.

#### Conclusion

This account was prepared from project records maintained by Jeremy Isenberg who was the Foundation's project manager for planning and execution of the project. Members of the Foundation who participated believe the project failed to realize its potential mainly because there was no knowledgeable, consistent, caring maintenance. The brief account given above can help guide a new plan which, in addition to correcting maintenance mistakes and omissions, remedies conditions that appeared during construction and which may have contributed to poor plant performance.



Jeremy Isenberg



## Appendix A Design Vision

The overall vision for the Event Garden is:

- An enclosed outdoor flexible gathering space for both formal and informal occasions; These could include outdoor meeting, lectures and/or ceremonies for community and/or private groups;
- To provide a quiet, shady place for individuals and small groups. The space should accommodate up to approximately 150 people, but be configured such that small groups and/or a single individual could feel comfortable and welcome in the space(i.e. individuals or and/or small groups talking, reading or drawing);
- A space that integrates the civic, rental and recreation uses in the park;
- A self-contained place with limited connection to the play-ground, that can be used independently of, or in conjunction with either or both the Main House and Pavilion;
- Improve the vista from the Main House terrace looking westward;
- To keep maintenance levels within the realm of a well maintain park, consistent with other parks in surrounding communities;
- Composed of plants that provide seasonal color and can hold up to public use and the presence of children;
- To embrace the overall vision for the park as, a beautiful and memorable experience for all visitors to the park.

## Appendix B Agreement Between the Town and Foundation (HPPF)

Physical Improvements shall include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Area to be developed  
HPPF shall develop an area approximately ½ acre to accommodate up to about 150 persons seated at table. The area, which is shown on the accompanying plan approved by Town of Atherton is delineated by low shrub hedges having openings to the Pavilion and Main House and to the west (playground).
- Preparation  
HPPF shall remove some existing vegetation in order to create a clear space as shown on Exhibit B. Some shrubs and trees shall be preserved for replanting elsewhere in the finished space. The rose plantings in the existing rose garden shall be preserved and relocated as required by Town of Atherton. The statue of Diana will be moved as shown on the plan.

- **Planting and irrigation**

As shown on the Plan, HPPF shall plant a shade tree canopy, low hedges, flowering shrubs, perennials and ground cover. Irrigation will meet water irrigation regulations of Town of Atherton. Irrigation will be controlled by valves exclusive to the Event Garden and connected to the Park irrigation controllers. Town of Atherton will maintain the irrigation system and plantings after the 12-month contractor warranty period expires in a manner to ensure that the planted materials thrive in a healthy condition. For at least 4 years HPPF will prune all newly planted trees in coordination with the Town of Atherton Public Works department.
- **Surface**

HPPF shall prepare the paved and land areas shown in Exhibit A, including grading, and cover it with decomposed granite for pedestrian access throughout the Event Garden. Paved areas shall be constructed so as to be permeable and to minimize surface runoff. Runoff will be directed to planted areas and to the low-lying collection basin adjacent to the project. Areas not intended for pedestrian access such as flower and shrub beds may be covered with gravel, mulch and other permeable surface treatments.
- **Seating**

HPPF shall install in the locations shown in the Plan wooden benches consistent in size, material and design with existing benches in the Park.
- **Lighting**

Lighting is not contemplated as part of the HPPF project. Conduit may be laid during construction to facilitate adding lights at an unspecified time in the future.
- **Maintenance**

Following transfer of the Event Garden from HPPF to Town of Atherton, ongoing maintenance shall be the responsibility of Town of Atherton. However, as stated above, for at least 4 years HPPF will prune all newly planted trees in coordination with Town of Atherton Public Works