

Collaboration Blazes Trail for Facility

Partnerships at the root of new Trails and Trees Environmental Center in southcentral Pennsylvania.

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Game News

A windowed wall faces south, looking out over a patchwork of farmland and development, highway traffic and mountains colored gray and green. On a clear day, you can see all the way to Maryland—some 40 miles distant.

It's a view that offers so much.

And it's a view that makes you wonder how the children who take their seats in the classrooms at the new environmental center will ever keep from looking out the window.

On an unusually warm October Saturday, about 200 people gathered in southcentral Pennsylvania for the

dedication of the new Trails and Trees Environmental Center, which sprouted to life earlier in 2013 through collaboration between the Mechanicsburg Area School District and the Wildcat Foundation, a nonprofit entity that raises money for projects within the district.

Many other partners, including the Pennsylvania Game Commission, contributed in some way to the project.

The new building totals 5,424 square feet and fits well with the surrounding greenery. Rain barrels collect from every downspout, solar panels tile



SOLAR PANELS tile the south-facing side of the Trails and Trees Environmental Center on the Mechanicsburg Area School District campus. The original Trails and Trees Center—a Civil War-era farmhouse can be seen in the background.

the roof and a 100-foot windmill towers above the building.

The site itself offers much more. Seventy-five different tree species can be found on the grounds, and some individual trees have historical significance. One is a direct descendant of a tree planted by Johnny Appleseed, while another is the ancestor of seeds shot into space on Apollo 14.

Three miles of hiking trails snake their way around the center. There are three natural springs, two outdoor classrooms, a variety of gardens and a bird blind there, and deer—even bears—occasionally have made their way across campus.

Ed Charles, who decades ago helped form the ecology club that did much of the initial work on the grounds, said the site always presented an ideal backdrop for teaching lessons on nature.

“It’s perfect,” said Charles, who retired from teaching geography in 2000 and now is 71 years old. “I don’t know where in the state you could have a better location.”

And now that location also includes a state-of-the-art building with partitioned classrooms and office space.

The Wildcat Foundation puts the building’s price tag at about \$613,000. But it’s hard to say how much it might have cost if so many building materials and hours of labor weren’t donated. Maintenance staff from the school district performed much of the finishing work as a way of keeping costs down.

The Game Commission’s donation was more modest. The agency provided artworks to display on the walls of the classrooms and lobby, and bird boxes



ABOUT 200 people turned out for the Oct. 5 ceremony to dedicate the Trails and Trees Environmental Center, located just off U.S. Route 15 and state Route 114.

to be placed outside.

But it’s important to point out, said Wildcat Foundation president Gary Weber, that even with the building now complete, the collaborative effort that drove the project continues.

The grounds around the center are planted and maintained by an all-volunteer garden club. And Weber said there are many more examples.

“It’s really evolving into a huge grassroots project,” he said at the ceremony. “We were really hoping the community would buy into it, from a youth standpoint, and they have.”

In his address at the dedication, Weber noted that as work to build the center was underway, school district officials were doing work of their own to form an environmental studies curriculum for students of all ages.

And that shared focus on the environment and the role it plays in a child’s education has given Mechanicsburg a facility few school districts could dream of.

Now, if the students there can only keep from looking out the window. ♣