

Cleanup crew did the job

Getting ready for Family Fun Day Saturday at City Center Plaza called for a lot of teamwork

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By Jud Snyder

You can't find a better local example of President Barack Obama's Economic Stimulus program than the immaculate grounds of Rohnert Park's City Center Plaza near the public library. Grand opening of the plaza will take place Saturday. Who got the work done? Well, it's a spirited cooperation with RP's Dept. of Public Works, Sonoma County Adult and Youth Development (SCAYD) based in RP, Sonoma County Water Agency, Sonoma County Office of Education, Workforce Investment Board and the nonprofit New Ways to Work.

The county received \$1.2 million from Washington to set up the program designed to find summer jobs for at-risk teens from low income families aged 14 to 24. They're called Summer Youth Ecology Corps. Sonoma County has put 325 young people in the six-week program that began July 1 and ends in early August. They're paid \$8 an hour.

Bringing the focus down locally, Shaydra Pflaum-Scott, working out of the SCAYD office, coordinates the program and Tom Kelley, a 20-year employee of the Public Works Dept. supervises the crew.

"The benefits are obvious," said Shaydra. "Young people, who would otherwise be idle this summer, are now earning a paycheck and developing new skills restoring local creeks, maintaining urban parks and other valuable community projects. Some are working with the Boys and Girls Club, KRCB television and the animal shelter.

"The program has a long term value," she added. "It has the potential of changing their lives. And when they've completed it the Office of Education gives them a Work Ready Certificate for their next job." Formerly at-risk youngsters from low-income families couldn't ask for a better letter of recommendation than that.

From Kelley's point of view the improvements the young teams did to dramatically change the new City Center Plaza is amazing.

"The parking lot across from Burbank's affordable housing was a real mess. Filled with weeds and looking abandoned has been neatly upgraded. The grounds between the plaza and the Public Safety building have been virtually manicured," said Kelley. "They've also cleaned up the area between the plaza and the library's patio with its own landscaping. This extends the plaza to combine the two areas into one big park. There'll be a fountain in the middle, the clock tower is already in place and the city has three solar panels at work to help out on costs."

DPW crews have been working on maintenance jobs here. "But when Shaydra called and said she had a work crew looking for assignments and we need someone to tell them what has to be done, I was ready.

“The work’s being done with hand tools all the way. DPW can supply a few power tools for special work, but almost all of it has been shoveling, tree trimming and pulling weeds out the old way. They’re doing a remarkable job.” Kelley said. “Only about seven kids, male and female, but they’re really a bunch of hard-working young people.”

The capstone of their work will take place at the dedication and grand opening celebration at the plaza.

It’s a shining example of how federal Economic Stimulus works on the local level, and no doubt in many other cities in the country.

Kelley, 39, who has a 6-year-old daughter, Katelyn, in Evergreen School, said, “We really depend on volunteers, but this program with SCAYD really tops ‘em all. We’d definitely hire them again if we can.”