

Mission Garden's New Tree of Life

Arizona Daily Independent, July 7, 2012

By Raul E Ramirez

In November 1999 Tucson citizens approved Proposition 400 by a majority of 60% of the voters. More specifically the voters approved the creation of the Tucson Origins Heritage Park which included the historically accurate recreation of the San Agustin Mission and Convento, Mission Garden, Granary, Carrillo House, Native American interpretative area and other projects as outlined in the Rio Nuevo Multipurpose Facilities District Special Election informational pamphlet. Proposition 400 projects were to be funded by the TIF, a tax incentive facility district that set aside a certain percentage of the sales tax collected from that district over the baseline year and administered by a Rio Nuevo Board of Directors.

The TOHP project was envisioned as an eco/cultural tourism sites that would showcase 4000 years of continuous habitation and cultivation on west bank of the Santa Cruz River adjacent to the base of Sentinel Peak. This site is considered the birthplace of Tucson.

Nine years later the only visible element of the planned TOHP was the Mission Garden's double adobe wall on a four-acre plot that overlaid the original site of the Mission Garden. However, a major archeological dig had preceded work at the Garden and adjacent area. Complementing the archeological work were the remediation of landfills (two sites), the construction documents for TOHP, the educational materials developed by Night and Day Studio, and infrastructure development in the Rio Nuevo.

In 2009 the work stopped on the reconstruction of the cultural elements. There were several factors that impacted the TOHP; these included a shift of funding priorities to central core downtown revitalization, political and economic factors, and perceived mismanagement of the project.

In March of 2009, a group of concerned Tucson residents started meeting to discuss how to address the work stoppage of the TOHP and named themselves "Friends of Tucson's Birthplace." This group held several meetings with city, county and state elected officials advocating for the completion of the TOHP as an eco/cultural tourism site. The group presented its position paper and over 1300 petition signatures in support of TOHP to the Rio Nuevo Board and elected officials. When it became clear that we needed a formal structure to keep the dream alive, we incorporated with the

Arizona Corporation Commission on October 26, 2009. This was followed by obtaining a non profit 501(c)3 designation in 2010.

Our mission is to preserve, honor, protect, restore and promote the cultural heritage of Tucson's Birthplace. The FOTB is fully committed to the completion of the Mission Garden as the first step toward the total project completion of TOHP. Being a relatively new group, we have purposefully maintained a neutral stance with respect to Rio Nuevo politics. We have demonstrated a willingness to engage all parties in a constructive dialogue about the future of the TOHP. This position and our commitment to raise \$350,000 were the salient factors allowing our negotiation of a five-year operational agreement commenced in November of 2011 with the City of Tucson and Pima County to operate the Mission Garden.

In the seven months of our operation of the Garden we have been able to install a water meter and obtain connection to City water and install a drip-irrigation system, and a solar panel that allows watering on a scheduled basis. We planted 130 Kino Heritage fruit trees, contoured the Phase I orchard to capture rain water, established walking paths to the Garden and around the fruit trees, developed a temporary parking area including handicapped parking, built a wooden footbridge over the swale, and built a sizable ramada using traditional materials (mesquite, ocotillo, and saguaro ribs). We also entered a contract with Desert Survivors, a non profit nursery that hires disabled adults, for general maintenance of the Garden.

We are now entering Phase II of the Garden and will be developing a Native American timeline garden designed to demonstrate Native American use of desert plants during the Archaic, Hohokam, and O'odham periods. In addition we will be planting native trees within and around the Garden. To that end, a grant proposal was made to the Tohono O'odham Nation under their gaming revenue sharing program.

In recognition of our stellar work the Arizona Historical Advisory Commission selected the Mission Garden project as an Arizona Centennial 2012 Legacy Project.

Our fundraising effort will continue and thus far we have raised over \$175,000. These funding efforts represent approximately 1/3 in federal Grants, 1/3 in private foundation grants, and 1/3 from individual donors. Our next funding event is being planned for Tucson's Birthday and will be a

Sunday breakfast at the Mercado San Agustin on August 26 starting at 7:30am. In another fundraising event we will host up to 400 attendees of the Garden Writers of America National Conference in October 2012.

Our advocacy will continue as we will be making a presentation on eco/cultural tourism and the TOHP to the Tucson Chamber of Commerce on July 16. We are requesting a meeting with the new Chairman of the Rio Nuevo Board, Fletcher McCusker.

Given all the work that the FOTB has done to bring new life to the Mission Garden and keep the TOHP dream alive, we can be called the “New Tree of Life.”

Tags: Mission Gardens, Raul Ramirez, rio nuevo, Tucson Origins Heritage Park