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\$10 million gift clears way for PSU tree garden

By Adam Smeltz

UNIVERSITY PARK -- A \$10 million commitment from State College resident Charles H. "Skip" Smith will allow Penn State to start work this year on a long-awaited arboretum, university President Graham Spanier said Friday.

The public arboretum, expected to cover about 400 acres when it's done, will span the old Mitchell Tract between East Park Avenue and the Mount Nittany Expressway. Main entrances, adjacent to an education center, a conservatory and an event lawn, will sit just north of Park Avenue near Bigler Road, according to a master plan.

"Mr. Smith shares the university's vision of the arboretum at Penn State as a place where students, families and researchers can all learn more about the natural world," Spanier said in a trustees meeting at the Nittany Lion Inn.

He said development of the arboretum will depend almost exclusively on private money and will become a priority in Penn State's next major fundraising drive. Building the horticultural preserve -- a mix of trees, gardens, natural research facilities, walking paths and gathering spaces -- is expected to last decades and cost tens of millions of dollars.

The first phase, spurred by the Smith commitment, should be done by spring 2008, Penn State reported. It will include an overlook pavilion, conservatory terrace, event lawn, rose garden and horticulture demonstration area, all visible from Park Avenue.

Those features will be in an area called the H. O. Smith Botanic Gardens, named for Charles Smith's late father, Harry. "I've always been interested in trees and plants myself," Smith said in a video presentation produced by Penn State. He hopes the arboretum will include a closely clustered variety of trees, Smith said. There, he went on, schoolchildren could pick up an array of unique leaves "all within a couple acres."

His father was a Penn State alumnus -- class of 1920 -- who went on to become a faculty member, then a local businessman. H. O. Smith's firm, the State College Construction Co., worked on the landmark Post House along North Atherton Street, Memorial Field and a number of Penn State buildings and fraternity houses, according to the university.

H. O. Smith also was knowledgeable about trees, perennial flowers and shrubs, and shared those insights with his son, the younger Smith said in the video.

Known for his modesty, Skip Smith politely declined an offer to be interviewed Friday. Smith did not attend the trustees meeting on Friday, either.

Quoted in a Penn State news release, he said he has been enthusiastic about the arboretum plans since the 1990s. The university has floated a number of arboretum concepts since 1914.

Smith, in the release, said the gardens will "traverse the very space that, as a freshman, H. O. hiked at length. The gardens also will be a beautiful gateway to the University Park campus, and I'm sure my father would feel honored."

A 1948 Penn State graduate, Skip Smith and his brothers -- James B. and Thomas L. -- worked with their father in H. O. Smith and Sons, a local development and rental company. Skip Smith also founded State College Television Co., which has since become State College Audio-Visual Supply. Late last year, the university agreed to buy about 1.5 acres along North Atherton Street from the Smith Partnership and H. O. Smith and Sons. The price was almost \$2.9 million.

Forest-biology professor Kim Steiner said the arboretum will be a boon to students, including landscape architecture and biology classes. It also could host student sculpture projects and outdoor dance programs, he said.

"There's a multitude of possibilities," said Steiner, who will direct the arboretum. "This will be the only public arboretum or botanic gardens between southeastern Pennsylvania, southwestern Pennsylvania and northeastern Pennsylvania. It really fills a regional void."

Annual attendance, including visitors from across the state, is projected to reach easily into the tens of thousands.

Steiner said Penn State will run a national search for a design firm to detail the plans, then seek a contractor to begin development.

Ultimately, the arboretum will have its own staff. A portion of the Smith gift, and other gifts, will build an endowment to fund ongoing maintenance and operations, Spanier said.

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