LSU Hilltop Arboretum Breaks Ground on $1.28 Million Expansion

LSU’s Hilltop Arboretum educational facility hosted a groundbreaking ceremony on Tuesday, Feb. 26, in the arboretum’s Margaret Holmes Brown Pavilion, to officially announce plans for a $1.28 million expansion project. The new 2,050-square-foot Imogene Newsom Brown Education Facility – named in honor of the late initial donor to the project – will more than double the existing facility space. The facility will feature the Beverly Brown Coates Auditorium, and will also house a conference room and warming kitchen.

The facility will also be the first LSU building to be registered with the U.S. Green Building Council for possible Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, certification, according to LSU System Interim President and LSU Interim Chancellor William Jenkins. He described the honor as being “a significant contribution to LSU in its entirety and to the community.”

LEED-certified buildings are designed to lower operating costs and increase asset value, reduce waste sent to landfills, conserve energy and water, be healthier and safer for occupants and reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions. LEED-certified buildings qualify for tax rebates, zoning allowances and other incentives in hundreds of cities.

Also included in the new facility will be a courtyard designed by Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects of New York will anchor the education facility to the exiting open-air pavilion. Named the Bert and Sue Turner Courtyard, it will provide an important demonstration for best practices for developing outdoor living space that extends the indoor space into the landscape, and works in concert with natural systems to utilize water and plant resources in a sustainable way.

In addition to educational programming, the new structure will also host fundraising events and will be the final piece of a 1999 building plan that includes the existing administrative building, library and open-air pavilion designed by award-winning Lake Flato Architects of San Antonio, Texas.

LSU College of Art & Design Dean Alkis Tsolakis said that the groundbreaking occasion is very symbolic in the world of architecture.

“Groundbreaking commemorates the moment when our ancestors stopped hunting and gathering and began planting and building,” he said. “This is a momentous occasion, marking a new beginning with Mother Earth. At the LSU College of Art & Design, we continue the traditions of groundbreaking – planting and building. Hilltop is, for us, one of those increasingly rare places where the harmony between planting and building and the harmony between the garden and the world are kept alive.”

LSU Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture Professor Van Cox, also a former interim director of the school, recounted how Robert Reich – the late LSU landscape architecture professor who founded the department – befriended Emory Smith, Hilltop’s donor, and often brought students to the site “not only to learn about the plant material, but to meet the wonderful person who loved the landscape.”

“That’s one of the reasons why we find this new classroom facility to be so wonderful,” Cox said. “We will finally have a climate-controlled space to come to and teach some of these classes, and also because our students will begin to see the legacy of Emory growing as this facility improves. There’s no greater lesson to learn from that.”

Our Hilltop Director Peggy Davis Coates said the Friends of the LSU Hilltop Arboretum group raised all funds for the expansion project through more than 300 private donations. She added that construction of the facility is set to be completed by August 2013.

Jenkins described breaking ground on the project as an “inspirational and uplifting” occasion for not only all who have worked to expand the offerings of the arboretum through the years, but for the community as a whole.

“Many gathered here today dreamed of what Hilltop could be,” he said. “To come back and see how far it has come, to see the community support and to see those ideas and dreams come to fruition and become something we can enjoy now is very special.

“There’s something mystical and magical about LSU and this community. We see it every day. There’s a dedication and devotion to our place and to the university associated with our place. You see that exemplified so very clearly today.”